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AUSTRALIA v URUGUAY

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FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA

On behalf of Chairman Frank Lowy and the Board of Football Federation Australia, welcome to this Powerade Series match and crucial FIFA World Cup qualifier between the Qantas Socceroos and Uruguay.

Tonight's match holds great significance for both nations as they attempt to qualify for the world's premier sporting event, the FIFA World Cup.

Qualification for the FIFA World Cup, regarded by many as the "holy grail" of Australian sport, would be particularly significant on this occasion with next year's tournament being held in Germany, scene of our only appearance to date, back in 1974.

A lot of preparation has gone into assisting coach Guus Hiddink and his team, both on and off the field, in keeping with our long-held position that "no stone would remain unturned" in our campaign to reach Germany.

Uruguay will undoubtedly prove to be a most worthy opponent – just as they were four years ago when the two nations last met – as befitting a nation that has won two FIFA World Cups.

The result of tonight's match aside, the code in this country is at an exciting stage with much progress being made in a short space of time.

The inaugural Hyundai A-League season has, to date, provided a quality spectacle with close matches, large crowds and plenty of high quality football.

Tonight's match also marks a significant milestone as it is our last match as a member of the Oceania Football Confederation ahead of our move to the Asian Football Confederation on January 1. The move allows for many exciting opportunities across a number of spheres but we will nevertheless remain a firm friend and actively involved in the Oceania region.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the NSW Government and to all of our partners: Qantas, Nike, Hyundai, Powerade, Telstra, National Australia Bank, Westfield, Australian Sports Commission and SBS.

John O'Neill
Chief Executive Officer
Football Federation Australia

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Sydney – Australia's global city and football capital – provides the stage for one of the biggest sporting events to be held in our country for many years.

Australia's "Road to Germany" culminates tonight at Telstra Stadium with the home leg of the playoff against Uruguay, the fifth-placed team in the South American qualification and the Qantas Socceroos' opponent from 2001.

It is over three decades since Australia took its place among football's elite at the FIFA World Cup finals, the greatest single-sport festival on the planet. Through its support for tonight's playoff, and the Iraq and Solomon Islands matches earlier in the year, the New South Wales Government continues to assist Football Federation Australia in its efforts to grow and nurture the world game in this country.

Beyond tonight's match lie boundless opportunities from our impending membership of the Asian Football Confederation, a transforming event for the game in Australia.

I know that all Australian sports fans will get right behind the Qantas Socceroos in this defining moment in our sporting history as they attempt to fulfil Destiny 06.

Morris Iemma, MP
Premier and Treasurer of New South Wales

WELCOME

OCEANIA FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

The long journey to the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany continues tonight with the playoff between Australia and Uruguay. For the winner of this match, the biggest sporting stage in the world awaits.

I would like to congratulate both teams on winning through to this stage of the FIFA World Cup qualifying program after fine displays in their respective confederation campaigns.

Four years ago, these two sides met at the same stage of the qualification process and provided spectators with a wonderful football display over both legs. History shows that Uruguay claimed that tie and went on to perform admirably at the 2002 FIFA World Cup in Korea and Japan.

It has been 24 years since a nation from our region attended a FIFA World Cup and this match marks an historic occasion for our confederation, as it is the last time Australia will represent Oceania in a football match. We wish them all the best for their future endeavours in the Asian Football Confederation.

To the fans and spectators of both teams, may I extend my appreciation for your support and patronage at this fixture. Fans are a big part of the football experience and we hope the match will provide an entertaining spectacle for all.

Good luck to both teams and may the spirit of fair play prevail throughout the match.

Yours in football,

Reynald Temarii
President
Oceania Football Confederation

SOUTH AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

On behalf of the South American Football Confederation, I express the warmest greetings to the Australian sporting public, on this significant occasion where a position for the World Cup Germany 2006 is being played for.

I am sure that the contest between the Uruguayans and Australians, driven by the will to win, will serve to demonstrate to the world, once again what is capable through football in bringing together two nations – a genuine display of brotherhood.

Uruguay, with it's extensive and rich football history, has ignited the torch of the South American sporting quality with unforgettable triumphs, some of which are the greatest episodes in the history of world football.

Australia, for its part, is a perfect example of the development of football in this part of the world. Oceania has a worthy representative, which deservedly has an opportunity to become part of the elite in Germany 2006. It is a nation respected for its patriotism and strong sporting traditions.

May the encounter be played in the right spirit and may the best team win. As members of the world football family, may our teams be examples in honouring fair play, respect and tolerance. It is the preaching of FIFA to offer a marvellous spectacle based on the common cause of bringing all people and cultures together.

Nicolas Leon
President
CONMEBOL
South American Football Confederation

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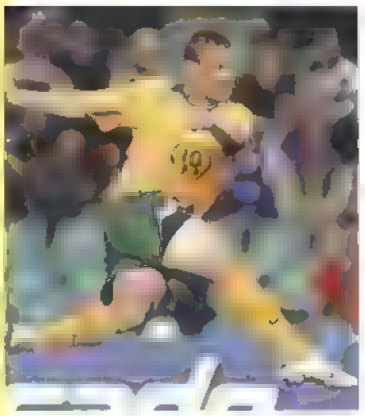

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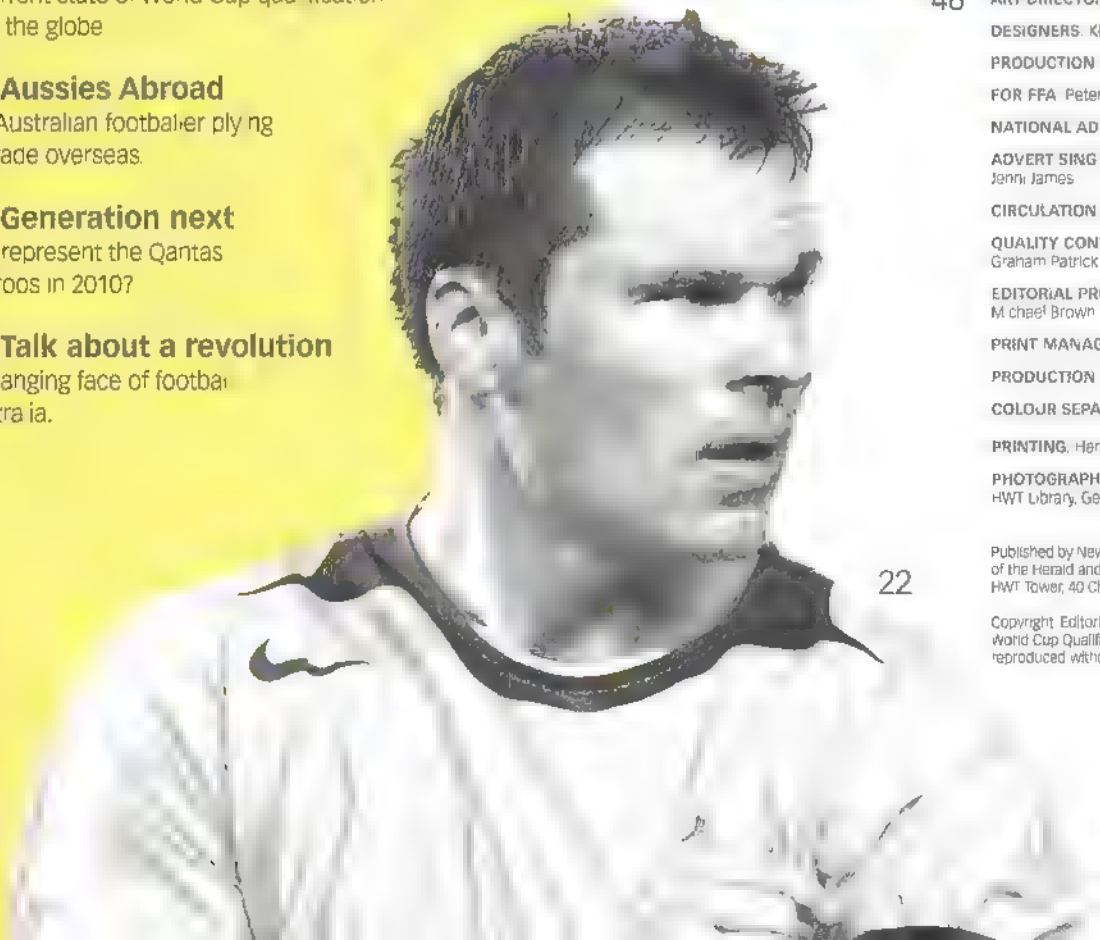

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Crunch time

It doesn't get any bigger than this: The next 90 minutes will decide which team goes to World Cup and which goes home. Let the battle commence.

By Michael Lynch

Proud, passionate and fanatical about football, Uruguay has always enjoyed a reputation disproportionate to its size. A combination of the prowess of its football teams and the devotion of its people to that team – known universally as Los Celestes – have resulted in ongoing success on the pitch.

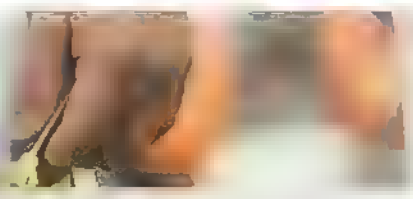
The Qantas Socceroos, having now experienced the torrent of emotion produced in Montevideo in 2001 and 2005, know all about the depth of their fervour and pass on. And it was the passion of Uruguay's dedicated followers, particularly in home matches, which helped it qualify fifth and grab the South American zone's playoff place after looking to be out of the running for much of the lengthy qualifying campaign.

Uruguay had a torrid qualifying tournament, beginning under the cavalier coaching approach of Juan Ramon Carrasco and concluding under his replacement, Jorge Fossati, who took charge when Carrasco was dumped in the 18-match marathon that South Americans nations are required to play – playing the nine other teams home and away – the Uruguayans did not win a single game on the road.

But, thanks to the support of their 12th man – the crowd – they made sure they picked up enough points at their home ground, Estadio Centenario, to sneak into fifth spot. They finished with a nerve-racking 1-0 victory over Argentina a little more than a month ago, which set up a second showdown in four years with the Qantas Socceroos.

Uruguay's side with a formidable array of firepower, its group of forwards are well equipped to put the Qantas Socceroos under enormous pressure when they attack with pace and purpose.

The 26 year old Diego Forlan, the ex Manchester United hitman who now plies his trade with top Spanish side Villarreal, they have one of Europe's top marksmen. He will be determined to emulate his father, Pablo, who played for Uruguay in the 1974 World Cup. Another striker, Marcelo Zalayeta (also 26) has spent several seasons in the Italian Serie A



(Left to right): Mark Viduka, Lucas Neill and Tim Cahill prior to Australia's victory in the Solomon Islands.

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Hiddink has retooled the Australian side, changed its shape and given it a new lease on life.

(Above) Harry Kewell congratulates Tim Cahill on his goal against Norway last year. (Left) Under Guus Hiddink, Jason Culina has become a fixture in the Australian team.

with Juventus, where his pace and grace has earned him the nickname "the Big Panther"

Alvaro Recoba, a thorn in the Qantas Socceroos side four years ago, needs little introduction. The 29-year-old Inter Milan attacking midfielder is dangerous from any distance, particularly from free kicks. Recoba, whose goal delivered Uruguay the win over Argentina that brought it to this match, has been at Inter for nine years and has also been a regular fixture in the Uruguayan side for years.

Another man well known to Australians is the destroyer of their dreams in 2001, Richard Morales. Although people tend to remember Dario Silva as the man who did the damage – he scored Uruguay's opening goal – it was the big target-man Morales who scored twice in that fateful game, including the crucial goal that put the Uruguayans 2-1 ahead on aggregate. He will be a real handful for Australia's defence in these two games. The combustible forward nowadays plays his football in Spain, but made his name at home with one of Uruguay's biggest clubs, Nacional of Montevideo.

Uruguay, however, will not get everything their own way against Guus Hiddink's revamped Qantas Socceroos. The Dutch master coach has given the Australian team a new lease on life, retooling it and changing its shape. They now play a pressing game with a back three, a compact midfield and wide players, with an emphasis on flexibility and mobility.

Mark Viduka, the talented striker who had not always shown his full talent in national colours, has embraced the responsibility of becoming captain and is relishing his football in a Socceroo shirt. Jason Culina (whom Hiddink signed for his Dutch club, PSV Eindhoven) and Hyundai A-League striker Archie Thompson have both become regular players under the Dutchman, while a number of former automatic choices can no longer be guaranteed a spot in the starting 11. Hiddink has shown himself to be no respecter of reputations.

The new blend worked in splendid style in the Qantas Socceroo's final hitout before this playoff, a 5-0 victory in London against Jamaica. Granted, the Reggae Boyz might not have been the toughest of opponents, but Australia could only beat what was in front of them, and from the moment Marco Bresciano gave them an early lead, the result was never in doubt.

It will not, of course, be anywhere as easy tonight against a country which, historically, has defied its size and bucked a global trend in sport, where the big countries tend to dominate.

It would seem logical that the chances of a small country with a tiny population dominating the biggest sport in the world would be slim, if non-existent. But that is exactly what happened in the biggest game of them all, football. In the first 50 years of the 20th century, the sport established itself as the dominant code in almost every continent and forged its position as the most international of all sports. During this time, Uruguay became the benchmark for world football, giving it a storied past, an exalted reputation and a history that most nations in world football can only dream of living up to.

Despite having a population of barely more than two million people at the beginning of last century, Uruguay, which had only forged its independence in 1828 when Brazil and Argentina renounced territorial claims, quickly became a dominant power in the sport, far more successful than its giant South American neighbours. Such was their prowess that Los Celestes became the powerhouse of football on their own continent and around the world.

Uruguayan players congratulate Dario Silva on scoring against Australia in 2001

The Australian team lines up before its fateful match in Montevideo in 2001.

That Uruguay won the first World Cup on their own turf would not have been a surprise. This, after all was the nation that had in the preceding 15 years won six Copa America titles.

Between 1916 and 1935, Uruguay won no less than 10 major championships including the first-ever World Cup, defeating arch rivals Argentina 4-2 in the final in front of a packed house of screaming fans in the Estadio Centenario, which had been built to host that tournament.

That Uruguay won the historic championship on their own turf would not have been a surprise. After all, this was the nation that had in the preceding 15 years won six Copa America titles (Latin America's equivalent of the European Championships).

But the greatest indication that they were the world's top football ing nation came in the 1924 Paris Olympics and in Amsterdam four years later. Those Olympic Football tournaments can, in many ways, be seen as the trailblazing competitions for the World Cup, and Uruguay took the gold medal on both occasions. Its team contained several outstanding players, including the captain José Nasazzi and his midfield partner José Leandro Andrade. Nasazzi was a stonemason by trade and Andrade, a player whose skin colour and elegance earned him the nickname of "the Black Pearl", created the platform for goalscorers Hector Scarone, Hector Castro (who rose to the top of the football tree despite having only one arm) and Pedro Cea.

That squad's crowning moment came on July 30, 1930 in Montevideo, when they came back from a 2-1 half time deficit to defeat Argentina. Such was the outpouring of national pride that July 30 subsequently became – and remains – a public holiday in Uruguay.

In those days, international travel was not quite as easy as it is today. Despite their status as holders of the Jules Rimet trophy, Uruguay did not come to Europe to defend their crown in Italy in 1934, nor seek to regain it from the Italians (champions in 1934) when the competition was held in France in 1938.

It was not until after the war, when the World Cup returned to Latin America in 1950, that Uruguay once again took part. They derailed the

hopes and dreams of host country Brazil in the most spectacular fashion along the way.

That tournament was played in group format, with winners going through to a final pool of round-robin matches. The final match in the final pool saw Brazil, which was just emerging as a world football power, play Uruguay. Brazil only needed a draw in front of a massive crowd at Rio's 200,000 capacity Maracana stadium to win its first World Cup.

Uruguay needed to win to take its second world championship, and few gave them any hope of doing so in such an environment and against such high-calibre opposition. Things looked to be going according to the Brazilian script when the hosts led 1-0 well into the second half, but then it all turned sour for the hosts and sweet for the Uruguayans. Juan Schiaffino levelled the scores in the 66th minute, and 13 minutes later Alcides Ghiggia stunned the massive crowd when he netted a 79th-minute winner. Los Celestes dug deep, with goalkeeper Gaston Mazzoli holding firm, to send the Brazilian nation into mourning. It would be eight more years – in Sweden in 1958, when a 17-year-old Pelé inspired it to a stunning triumph – before Brazil took its first World Cup crown.

That truly was the high point in Uruguayan football, at least at an international level. While the country's leading clubs – Penarol and Nacional – have been among the giants of Latin American club football through the decades, the national team has not fared as well.

In 1954, in the Swiss World Cup, they were still one of the most powerful nations around, succumbing only to the Ferenc Puskas-led brilliant Hungarian team in the semi-final. But after that, there was a steady decline even though they usually managed to qualify for the finals.

At every home game, Uruguay's fans hold up signs showing "1950", denoting the last time it won the World Cup.

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In 1966, they went out in the quarter-finals, while in 1970 they achieved their best result since 1954 when they made the semi-finals against the Brazilian side led by Pelé, Gerson, Rivelino and Carlos Alberto, a team regarded by many as the best ever in the history of the game.

The Brazilians gained a measure of revenge for 1950, winning through to the final where their exhilarating football saw off Italy in the Aztec Stadium in Mexico. The 1970s, '80s and '90s were a dark time for Uruguay. In its glory days of global domination, it had been celebrated for fluent, skilful and attacking football; in the latter part of last century, rugged defence and a cynical approach to stifling the opposition became its byword. They became known as much for their fouling, negativity and violent play as their skill and flair. Although they made the 1990 World Cup in Italy, they failed to qualify again until 2002, after defeating the Qantas Socceroos in the Montevideo playoff.

But the passion for the game runs deep, as anyone who has seen the Centenario crowd in full flight will attest. For every home game the crowd waves a huge banner emblazoned with "1950", reminding the players of the tradition and legacy they must live up to. Such is the reverence for the game that in 2003 the Uruguayan Football Association bought, at public auction, the shirt and boots worn by Uruguay's 1950 captain Obdulio Varela after they were declared to be a national monument by the Uruguayan government.

In a statement, the Uruguayan authorities declared "the shirt in which he sweated to carry out this massive sporting achievement should remain in the country and be exhibited as an example of the best values of the Uruguayan people".

It's those values that Australia will do battle with tonight. ✖

Michael Lynch is the chief football writer for The Age *in Melbourne*

(Above) Brett Emerton shows the Solomon Islands' defence a clean pair of heels. (Top) Scott Chipperfield has become a fixture on the left for Australia.

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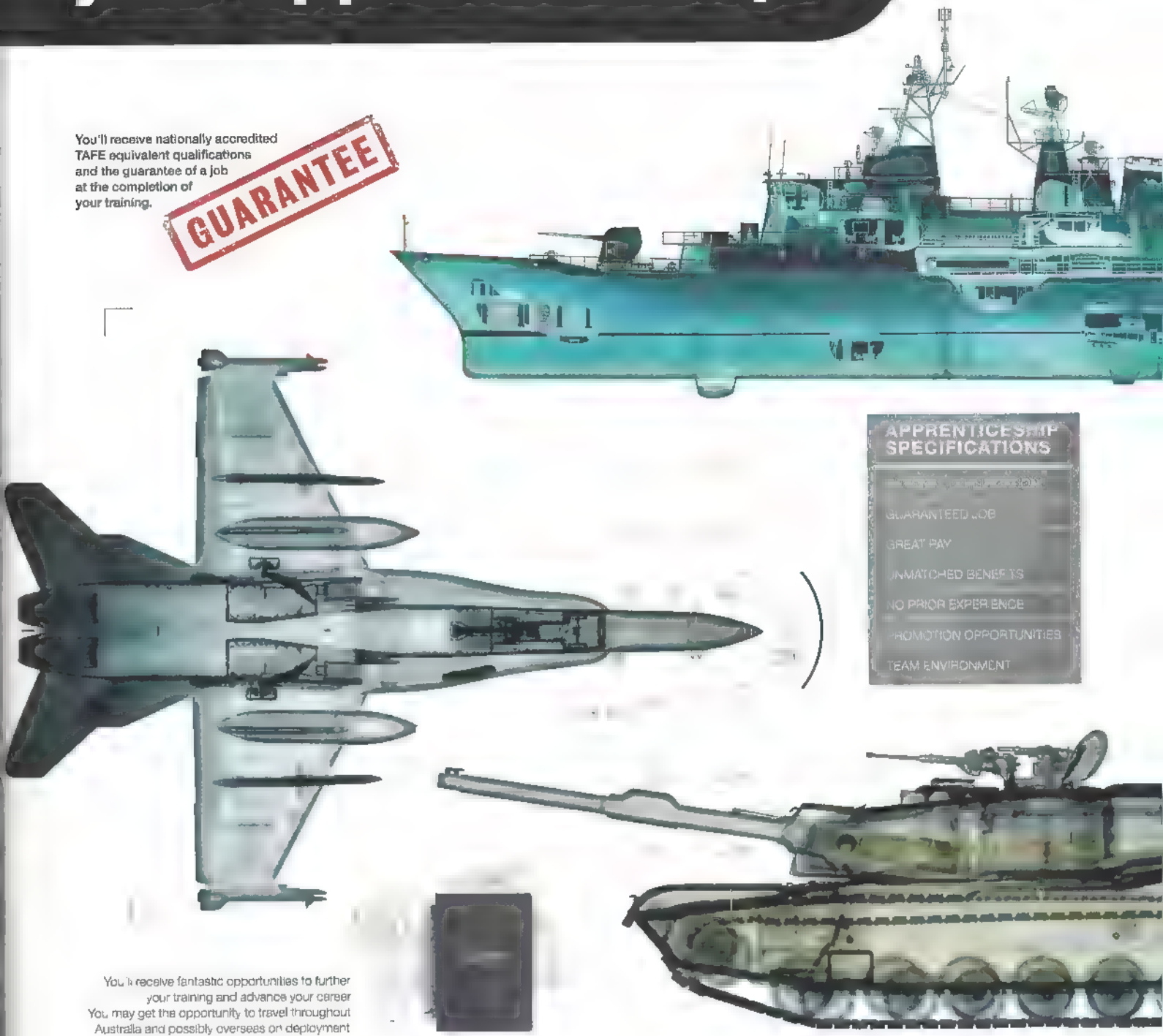

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Johnny Warren after leading Sydney's St George-Budapest to victory in a three-nation club tournament in Tokyo in 1971

Living on

It has been one year since the passing of Australian football great Johnny Warren, but his presence is still felt throughout the nation.

By David Lewis

A year has passed since Johnny Warren – "Captain Socceroo" to the wider world – was taken from us. But his legacy pulses as rhythmically as the bossa nova beats of Brazil, the country he adopted as a second home in his 28 visits there across four decades.

That legacy includes the dawn of the Hyundai A-League, the competition Warren envisioned free from the clutter of ethnic enmities, Australia's entry into Asia's warm embrace at club and national team level, and the acknowledgment from those who administer the code – and many other Australians – that it is "football", not "soccer" and definitely not "wogball".

In his 61 years, Warren – who was appropriately laid to rest by a State funeral – shone like a star, accomplishing enough to fill a dozen lifetimes before cancer's mortal grip finally yanked him away. But not after a battle to the end, fought with trademark optimism, humour and fatalism.

Warren was a lightning rod, advocate and an agitator of eloquence. He was also an author, an SBS-TV panellist of gravitas and charm, an advisor to governments, an enemy of corruption and self-interest, and a man greeted like a long-lost family member by the great and good in football's corridors of power.

As a young captain of Australia back in 1967, Warren understood football's significance as a bridge into other cultures – the sport that could boldly go where rugby league and Australian Rules could not. Long before politicians hitched a ride on the carousel, Warren knew football was sport's tool of diplomacy, understanding and expansion.

Les Murray, friend of more than 40 years, media colleague and collaborator in the book *Mr and Mrs Football*, feels a heightened sense of loss as the anniversary of Warren's departure looms and an abiding sense of irony, too.

As his life slipped away at Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Warren could see a dark comedic side to his plight, confiding in Murray that with the planks in place for a growth spurt in the sport, his "sense of timing was a bit off".

"Johnny always said that football would gain a broader acceptance and the A-League's popularity is proving that," Murray says. "His parting words were 'I told you so'."

"He was always convinced that one day Australia would embrace this game. But he wouldn't claim that the mission has been fully accomplished.

"He survived the exit of the old regime and the entrance of Frank Lowy and his new order, and could see the irony at not being around to see it come to fruition."

Australia's entry into Asia's football family in January next year would have met with Warren's approval.

"He'd have been ecstatic about that, it was something he sermonised for a long time about," Murray says. "He was never a fan of direct World Cup qualification through Oceania; it was lowering the bar, in his view."

The boy from Botany – a member of the only Socceroos side ever to qualify for a World Cup in 1974, even though injury only allowed him to play one game – felt alienated in a land where "soccer" was demonised and he was abused for adopting "wogball" as a *cause celebre* and lifetime passion.

> **Back in 1967, Warren understood the game's significance as a bridge into other cultures.**

An accident of time and geography placed him in the wrong continent at the wrong time. He should have grown up bending balls around the beaches of Rio or the favelas of Sao Paolo rather than bashing heads with sporting bigots in Bondi and Botany.

But Warren turned an accident into a blessing, sounding football's trumpet as poignantly as Miles Davis or Dizzy Gillespie ever could.

As he gazes down from on high, accompanied by accolades that include his 62 Socceroos caps, his Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) and the FIFA Centenary Order of Merit that FIFA president Sepp Blatter draped around his neck in Sydney just months before his death, he will feel a certain satisfaction.

According to Murray, Warren's reaction to the Hyundai A-League would be "the jury is still out, but the start has been terrific."

"He'd have seen it as inclusive because it has carried along with it a lot of the fans who followed the old national league, and Johnny had a lot of respect for what migrants brought to football and how they cherished the game.

"He'd have been against a strategy aimed at disenfranchising them in favour of a new blue-eyed, blonde-haired football supporter. But he'd be critical about the player recruitment of the A-League, perhaps even stunned by the lack of players from Africa, Latin America and Asia.

He wouldn't want to see players from the same old sources. He'd see it as a lack of trust of other cultures."

Never one to duck behind an emotional shield, Warren's reaction to Australia's heartbreaking World Cup exit against Iran back in November 1997 shone a light on his humanity.

In front of a television audience of millions he broke down and wept as the enormity of the Socceroos surrendering a two-goal lead to miss out on France 98 hit home.

"I will never forget that day. And it's at this time of year, as we approach another World Cup decider against Uruguay, that the seat beside me in the studio seems emptier than ever," laments Murray. "Johnny was a true-blue Aussie. He was so iconic in his zeal that he was almost beyond personal criticism. He was also a thoroughly decent man."

Warren was never pompous or bitchy with anybody and was, without doubt, the great football messenger for our times.

"Even the likes of Frank Lowy admitted after his death, what has been achieved since would not have been possible without Johnny Warren."

According to Murray, Warren's biggest regret was not being reinstated as Socceroos captain for the 1974 World Cup after being out for 15 months with a knee injury – not out of vanity, but because he was denied the opportunity to deliver a message to an Australian public.

"The game had lost him as spokesman and that hurt him," Murray explains. "He was already an articulate messenger and he wanted to push the beauty of the game.

"Instead what we got was Peter Wilson, who was a thoroughly decent guy, but a dull Yorkshireman who had no interest in Australian football's growth. Johnny saw that as a lost opportunity."

Murray's autobiography, *By the Balls*, is due out next year and it will touch on the chemistry between the Hungarian immigrant and the homegrown hero.

"When I came here as a boy, football was part of my baggage, for Johnny it was something he was born with."

And something he made into poetry for anybody who saw him play or listened to him talk. ✖

(Above) Warren in action for the Socceroos against South Korea in 1973. (Below) Warren with good friend and media colleague Les Murray.

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Leading from the front

Mark Viduka is revelling in the leadership role being demanded of him by Australia's new coach, Guus Hiddink.

By David Lewis

Four years ago a despondent and emotionally drained Mark Viduka trudged away from the scorched earth of Australia's failed World Cup qualification bid against Uruguay, questioning whether he could put himself through such anguish ever again.

Skip forward four years and Viduka – the first name on the team sheet of Qantas Socceroos coach Guus Hiddink – finds himself once more on the cusp of heartbreak or exultation as Australia enters a rematch against its nemesis.

Reincarnated under Hiddink, Viduka, who turned 30 last month, is now hinting at extending his international shelf-life as he relishes the welcome burden of the captaincy and the inner glow that now radiates from the entire team.

The Middlesborough striker's confidence in Hiddink is shared by the rest of a squad, unrecognisable from the shell-shocked side that conceded 10 goals in three games at the Confederations Cup in June where they were force-fed the wooden spoon.

Speaking after Hiddink's "total football" philosophies had begun to seep through in October's 5-0 destruction of Jamaica in London, Viduka – who scored the Qantas Socceroos' third to bring his tally to three in three games under the Dutchman – said, "I'm happy in myself and I'm happy the way the team is performing. I'm feeling very confident about the future. I don't remember us playing this well for a very long time.

"We've been working incredibly hard during our training camps. We come away shattered and sore every time, but it makes you stronger, fitter and faster and hungrier to succeed."

In Craig Moore's absence, Viduka's leadership qualities have blossomed.

Revelling in the responsibilities of being captain, Viduka introduces Solomon Island representatives to his team earlier this year

That brings us to Viduka's reversal of his previous pledge to make this, his third World Cup campaign, his last.

"Who knows?" he says. "Maybe we'll reach the World Cup, do well and I'll stick around for another four years. I haven't mind up my mind yet.

"We'll see what happens in the two matches with Uruguay, but it's something I'm certainly willing to think about."

Hiddink's decision to bestow the captaincy on Viduka in the absence of the injured Craig Moore raised a few eyebrows, but it proved a masterstroke for the Oceania qualifiers against the Solomon Islands and the Jamaica friendly in London.

It has galvanised the latent leadership qualities dwelling within the Middlesborough striker's imposing frame and wrung every last ounce of commitment from the player.

Previously isolated up front, Viduka is now surrounded by options, with hyperactive attacking midfielders Jason Culina, Marco Bresciano and Brett Emerton offering outlets – not to mention Melbourne Victory livewire Archie Thompson, who started ahead of Spain-based John Aloisi in London.

"That's what Guus is working on, providing options, so that players always have somebody close by to offload to," says Viduka. "That's the key for us. It's what he's all about.

"It makes life a lot easier for everybody."

Asking Viduka whether he enjoys being skipper is like asking an espresso drinker if they have a taste for caffeine. Viduka, who last led his country a decade ago as a Qantas Young Socceroo, says, "It's great, an extra responsibility and it's something I treasure each time.

"It makes you even more determined not to lose matches. You have to make decisions. If something goes wrong, you have to try and make it right on the behalf of the team. Guus has seen something in me and I'm happy about that."

"Captaincy makes you even more determined not to lose matches. If something goes wrong, you have to try and make it right."

But Viduka is at pains to point out that under Hiddink, every player is treated equally. "Australians in general just want to be treated the same as the next man and in this squad there are no favours. The door is open to everybody," he insists.

"Guus knows who he wants to play, but nobody else does. He keeps us all guessing. He doesn't name the team until the day of the match.

"Every player thinks they have a chance and it makes them fight even harder for a place."

A case in point was the Jamaica match. Bristol City midfielder Luke Wilkshire, who has spent more time in airport lounges than the pitch during previous Qantas Socceroos engagements, started while seasoned stars like Tim Cahill, Vince Grella and Josip Skoko watched from the bench.

Viduka claims a new culture of confidence is sweeping through the team.

"We're happy that the things we've been practising at training are coming together in matches. Everybody knows their jobs and everybody is up for it.

"We played well in patches at the Confederations Cup (in June), but we conceded too many goals and we really needed to get ourselves organised. I think that's happened under Guus."

Viduka's own personal challenge is to maintain the level of fitness attained since his recovery from a hamstring injury that reduced him to a bystander for much of last season.

"I'm feeling the best I have for some time, but I know I have to keep working at it," adds Viduka, who hasn't ruled out returning to play in the Hyundai A-League once his premiership days are done.

Raised in the Melbourne suburb of St Albans by Croatian parents, Viduka made his mark as a teenager with the Melbourne Knights before embarking on a European adventure that has taken in stopovers at Croatia Zagreb, Glasgow Celtic, Leeds and Middlesborough.

Goals have been his motif for his clubs, but not for his country – until recently Viduka had struck just three times in 27 games before Hiddink's arrival removed the hex.

"It's unbelievable. But that's the way football is," he reflects. "You have to be patient."

A fusion of grace, delicate touches and deft delivery encased in a strapping package, Viduka – when the force is with him – still ranks among the most dangerous and admired strikers in Europe. For him, the key to World Cup qualification is maintaining the rage.

"This is a last chance for a lot of the boys. You look at Tony Popovic (32), Tony Vidmar (34), Stan Lazaridis (32) and even Craig Moore (30) and you can see there will soon be a changing of the guard," he adds.

"That has helped sharpen our desire to do well and to make sure we leave nothing back in the dressing room in these matches against Uruguay. We don't want to go through what happened four years ago again – and we're doing everything possible to do that.

"Whether we're successful, only time will tell."

Even if Australia find the street-wise Uruguayans an impossible barrier to breach, Viduka sees positives in the planks already put in place by Hiddink and the emergence of Australia's generation-next defenders: Michael Thwaite, Thompson, Joel Griffiths and Culina, to name but four.

"'Thwaitey' is an excellent prosect. He's calm and assured and his timing in the tackle is good," he says. "Then you look at what Jason Culina has done in a short time. He can create and score goals and is technically very strong.

"I think there are some great prospects coming through. The fact that Guus has shown faith in these players proves that anybody can get a game. And that's how it should be.

"Like the rest of the boys, I don't know if I'll start games until he names his team on the day of the match."

Viduka may well be the only person in Australia unsure of that, for if Australia is to make it past Uruguay, it will depend enormously on his newly demonstrated leadership skills. ✖

David Lewis covers football for the Daily Telegraph *in Sydney.*

"The fact that Guus has shown faith in these players proves that anyone can get a game. And that's how it should be."

Players such as Brett Emerton (left) will be looking to feed off Viduka's work up front.

- Striker?
- Defender?
- Qualifier?

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Dream date

Tim Cahill always dreamed of playing for Australia. With a World Cup berth at stake, he's hoping he never wakes up.

By Matthew Hall

The clock is ticking. There are just 90 minutes left until Australia's 2006 World Cup destiny will be known. Tim Cahill, Qantas Socceroo centrepiece and a man about to play a starring role, is unashamed to admit he's living a dream.

"One of my biggest dreams, ever, was to get the chance to play for Australia," Cahill says. "Then, once you actually get to play on the world stage, you want the opportunity to help your country play in a World Cup. To be where we are now, to be so close, is fantastic."

Another confession: For a man who has played in big games previously, including an English FA Cup Final against Manchester United, tonight's match is it. The big one. No contest. No debate.

According to Cahill, the consequences of tonight's result go beyond World Cup qualification. The future of football in this country, and a chance to have an influence on that, is at stake.

"It's no secret," Cahill says. "This is the biggest game in my life. Not only because it's big for us as players, but because this affects Australia, the whole country. It affects the A-League, helping make it a success. It affects young players, kids, and will make more people want to be involved in football.

"This is what football is crying out for in Australia. As ambassadors for the country, whether we play in Europe or in the A-League, this is our biggest chance to open doors for youngsters."

Cahill plays in his hometown tonight. The 25-year-old grew up in Kingsgrove and, like many, was introduced to football in his backyard by his father, Tim senior. But a visit to Samoa with his mother and brother to visit their grandmother almost changed his football career forever.

Cahill, aged just 14 at the time, was invited to play for Samoa in a FIFA youth tournament. A few short minutes on the pitch in Samoan colours was apparently enough to tie him to the Ocean a minnow for life. Australia wanted him back in green and gold and Samoa was happy to let him go, yet FIFA's strict eligibility

Cahill celebrates scoring against the Solomon Islands.

rules seemed to ensure his destiny would never be fulfilled with the Qantas Socceroos.

Lobbying from his family, Australian officials and anyone else who could make noise at FIFA, finally meant the creation of a loophole in 2004 that allowed players who had represented one nation's youth team to switch to another where they had strong ties.

Cahill, born in Sydney and Australian citizen, fit the bill. He was back in contention and was finally called up for the national team in March 2004 to make his debut against South Africa in London.

"My best memory is making my debut against South Africa," Cahill says. "I came on quite late in the game as a sub, but when Frankie (Farina) gave me the signal, it couldn't get better than that. It was a magical moment after all the sagas that I'd been through."

Cahill's subsequent rise is well documented. His FA Cup feats for Millwall in 2004, his move to Everton, where he inspired the Merseyside club to the top end of the English Premier League table, his box-to-box running for Australia that's proved an asset for Farina and Guus Hiddink. Cahill is now a genuine star. If he can play an influential role against Uruguay then his name will no doubt echo around the world – especially in Germany next year.

Cahill is now a genuine star. If he can play an influential role against Uruguay then his name will no doubt echo around the world.

Cahill's importance to both Everton and Australia was underlined in October when club and country were involved in a tug of war for his services.

According to Everton boss David Moyes, Cahill needed a rest, but not on club time. The club's view was that Australia's friendly against Jamaica in London was the perfect time away from the Premier League.

"As a footballer, all I want to do is play football," Cahill says. "I have a lot of respect for both (Moyes and Hiddink). Everton is my bread and butter where I play week in and week out, while Australia is my country. I have never turned down Australia and I will never turn down playing for Everton."

Cahill relishes the chance to represent his country.

"When two managers are arguing it's a compliment but, for me, it's best just to stay out of it and let two grown men resolve it in their own way.

"I understand managers saying to have a rest but, as a footballer, you never want to rest. I want to play in every game and want to be involved in every game. When you get asked to play, regardless of whether it is your club or your country, you never say no. It is the biggest honour to play for teams like Australia and Everton."

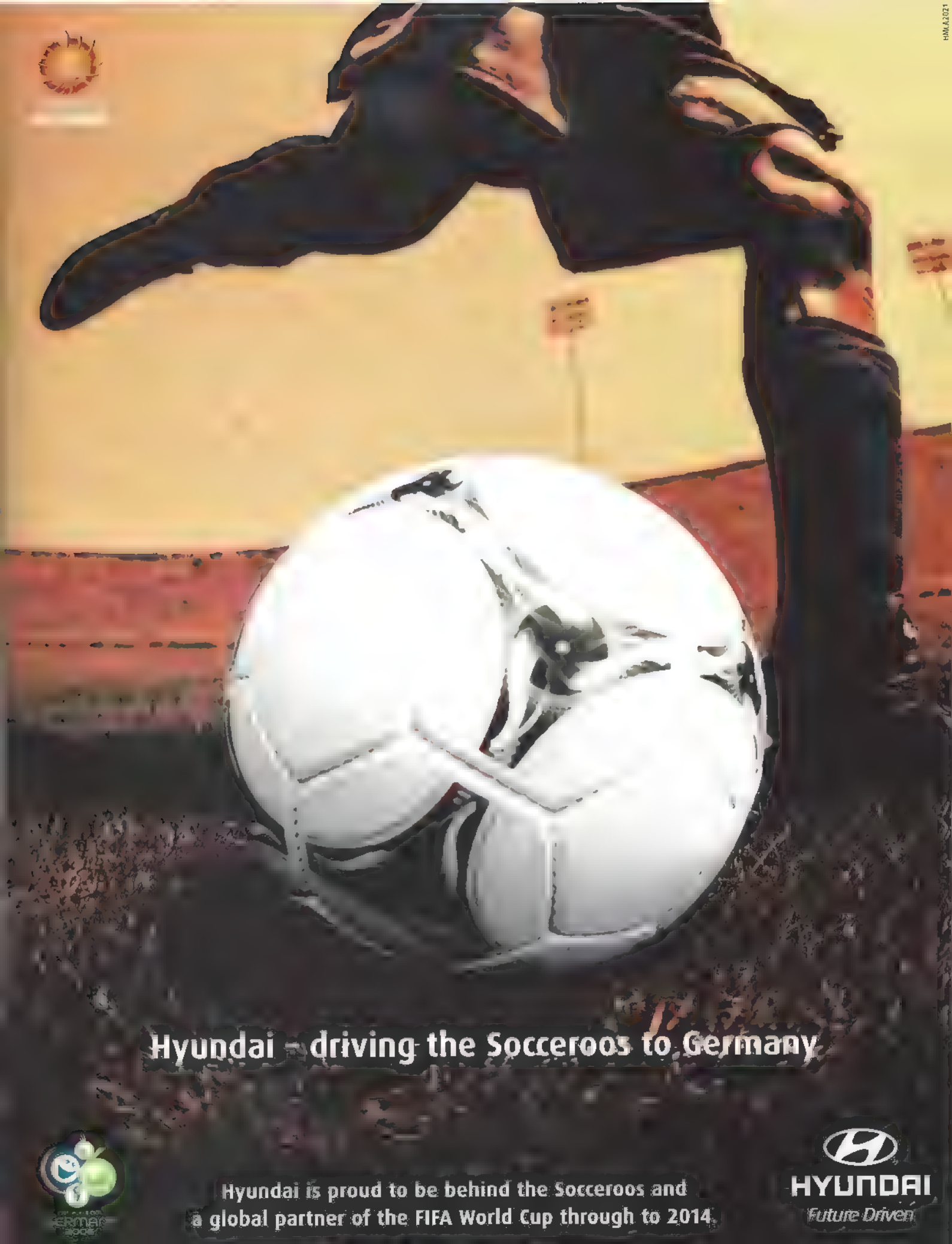
This is Cahill's first World Cup as a player but, just like the rest of us, he closely followed previous campaigns, watching the playoffs on television and feeling the heartbreak of 1997 and 2001.

"I watched Iran and Uruguay on television," he says. "I was cheering the boys on. I seriously thought that we were in against Iran and I felt the same against Uruguay four years ago. We were so close but so far away."

Here's some inside information – something to contemplate as *Advance Australia Fair* plays out tonight. When the first rousing strains roll out across Telstra Stadium and the team is standing in line, preparing to sing, this is what will be going through Tim Cahill's head. "Just winning," he says. "Anything to win.

"It is a night for cool heads and for being patient. The World Cup is the biggest thing any player can play in. It would be an absolute honour to be a part of it next year. The South Americans are very experienced and they've been there and done that. But we have to seize the moment. We have to grab it by the scruff of the neck and produce." ✖

"The South Americans are experienced and they've been there and done that. But we have to seize the moment. We have to grab it by the scruff of the neck and produce."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AUSTRALIA PLAYER PROFILES

BY MICHAEL LYNCH

AUSTRALIA

John ALOISI

Born February 5, 1976
Club Alaves, Spain
Caps 37 **Goals** 22

Striker

Adelaide-born Aloisi has been a fixture in Australian squads for several years now, although he has usually had to play third fiddle to Viduka and Kewell when they are available. Scored a six-goal haul against Tonga and is a five-timer against the Solomon Islands. Scored three goals at the 2004 Olympics. Has played in the English Premier League with Coventry City and in the Serie A with Cremonese. The only Australian to play in Europe's top three leagues – England, Spain and Italy

Marco BRESCIANO

Born February 11, 1980
Club Parma, Italy
Caps 20 **Goals** 6

Melburnian Bresciano is one of the few Australians to make his mark in the hugely competitive Italian Serie A. Bresciano cut his teeth in the NSL before moving to Italy as a teenager, first with Empoli before transferring to Parma. An exciting goal scoring midfielder with an explosive change of pace, Bresciano is also a dead-ball specialist. Made his debut in Australia's 1-0 Confederations Cup victory over then World Cup-holders France in June 2001

Midfielder

Tim CAHILL

Born December 6, 1979
Club Everton, England
Caps 13 **Goals** 8

Midfielder

Cahill had to wait a long time for his Australian clearance, but has made up for the delay, playing for his country more than a dozen times in 18 months, after making his debut in the 1-0 win over South Africa in London in 2004. A hard-running midfielder, Cahill took the English Premier League by storm in his 2004-05 debut after joining Everton from Championship side Millwall. Quick and tenacious, Cahill has the invaluable knack of arriving late in the penalty area and scoring precious goals, often with his head

Scott CHIPPERFIELD

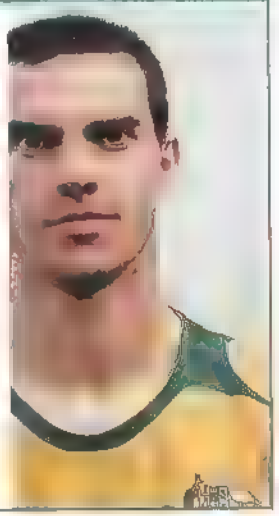
Born December 30, 1975
Club FC Basel, Switzerland
Caps 42 **Goals** 11

Making his name at NSL club Wollongong Wolves, Chipperfield moved to Europe in his mid-20s after twice winning the championship with the club. He made his international debut against Fiji in September 1998, but cemented his place in the national team after he moved to Switzerland, where he has enjoyed great success. A left-sided midfielder who can play as a left wing-back or striker, Chipperfield's pace, aggression and his ability to chip in with goals at crucial times are his strong suits.

Midfielder

Ante COVIC

Born August 30, 1975
Club Hammarby, Sweden
Caps 0 **Goals** 0



Goalkeeper

Covic has come from nowhere in recent months to give himself a shot at being part of the Qantas Socceroos World Cup bid as a back-up goalkeeper. The 30-year-old, who played in the NSL for Marconi, has had spells with German Bundesliga side Hertha Berlin and also Greek club PAOK Salonika. He is currently first-choice shot stopper with Swedish side Hammarby.

Jason CULINA

Born August 5, 1980
Club PSV Eindhoven, Netherlands
Caps 9 **Goals** 1

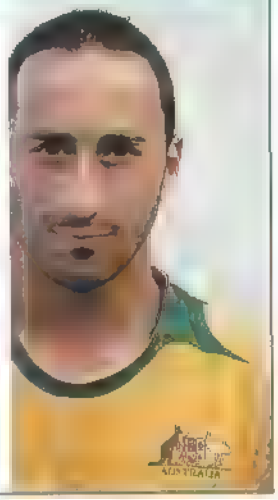
Midfielder with deft touch and excellent technique, Qantas Socceroos boss Guus Hiddink likes him enough to have signed him as a player for his club side, PSV Eindhoven. Broke into the national squad earlier this year and has looked comfortable playing at international level. Started with Sydney United and Sydney Olympic, but left Australia at a young age to join Dutch giants Ajax, where he spent several years before moving to FC Twente Enschede. His father, Branko, is one of Australia's top coaches.

Midfielder

* Note: Caps refers to senior international matches.

Ahmad ELRICH

Born May 30, 1981
Club Fulham, England
Caps 14 **Goals** 4



The former Parramatta Power and Busan I'Cons flyer became Australia's newest export to the English Premiership when he joined Fulham in the northern summer. The super-fast Elrich causes headaches for defenders with his pace and direct running. Made his senior Qantas Socceroo debut when he came off the bench in Caracas in the 1-1 draw with Venezuela in February 2004. Also played for Australia in the Athens Olympics. Another Sydney-born player

Midfielder

Brett EMERTON

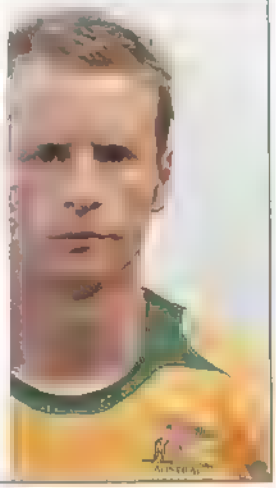
Born February 22, 1979
Club Blackburn Rovers, England
Caps 43 **Goals** 11

The Blackburn winger has been a regular fixture in the Australian first 11 in recent seasons after establishing himself in European football, first in the Netherlands with top Dutch side Feyenoord and then with English Premier League side Blackburn. Strong and powerful with plenty of pace, Emerton is likely to be used in a wing-back role by Hiddink if he opts to play with a five-man midfield. Captained Australia at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, his home town

Midfielder

Vince GRELLA

Born October 5, 1979
Club Parma, Italy
Caps 14 **Goals** 0



Great friend of his national and club teammate Marco Bresciano, Grella is a tough-tackling, no-nonsense midfielder who excels in a holding role, forming a screen in front of the defence and acting as a link to the attacking midfielders. But there is more to his game than just breaking up play, and he can add a creative element in deep. Like Bresciano, cut his teeth with Carlton in the NSL before moving to Italy as a teenager

Midfielder

Joel GRIFFITHS

Born August 21, 1979
Club Neuchatel Xamax, Switzerland
Caps 1 **Goals** 1

Another player who has come into the Qantas Socceroos squad only this year. Griffiths began his career with Sydney United before playing with Parramatta Power and Newcastle United in the NSL. He then moved to Switzerland in 2003. A striker when he played in Australia, he has been used as a wide midfielder by his club side. Went to the under-20 World Youth Cup in Nigeria in 1999 with several other players who have gone on to become full internationals

Midfielder/Striker

Zeljko KALAC

Born December 16, 1972
Club AC Milan, Italy
Caps 50 **Goals** 0

A schoolboy and under-20 international, Kalac made his senior Qantas Socceroos debut in 1992. Most of that time was spent as an understudy, first to Mark Bosnich, then to Mark Schwarzer. Kalac's career began in the NSL with Sydney United, and has featured spells in England with Leicester City and then in the Netherlands with Roda. Moved to Italy's Perugia, then switched to one of the world's biggest clubs, AC Milan, this season. A 200-centimetre giant, Kalac is known by his nickname, "Spider"

Goalkeeper

Harry KEWELL

Born September 22, 1978
Club Liverpool, England
Caps 17 **Goals** 6

Australia's best-known player and the only Australian in possession of a Champions League winner's medal, Kewell has endured a spell with injury that has kept him out for most of the past five months. When fit, he is a crucial member of the Qantas Socceroo starting 11. His pace, skill, passing ability and finishing make him an automatic selection. Whether he will be fit enough to play a significant role in this World Cup campaign is a critical question for Guus Hiddink

Midfielder

Stan LAZARIDIS

Born August 16, 1972
Club Birmingham City, England
Caps 57 **Goals** 0

One of the mainstays of the Qantas Socceroos, Lazaridis is well and truly in the veteran stage. His runs down the left-hand side of the pitch have made him a key player for his country for most of the past decade, operating either as a wing-back or an out-and-out winger. Made his debut 12 years ago in a 1-0 win over Kuwait in Singapore in April 1993. Was an over-age player at the Sydney Olympics in 2000. Played in the English Premier League with both West Ham and Birmingham.

Midfielder

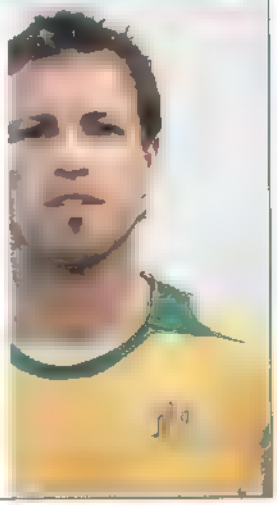
Ljubo MILICEVIC

Born February 13, 1981
Club FC Thun, Switzerland
Caps 5 **Goals** 0

Has battled back from two serious leg injuries – the second of which cost him the opportunity to play in the Athens Olympics – to put himself in contention for a World Cup place. A Melburnian who made his name in the NSL with Perth Glory before moving to Switzerland, he is now enjoying a Champions League campaign with FC Thun. Tall centre-back who is good in the air and comfortable on the ball. Captained both the national under-20 and under-23 teams.

Defender

Lucas NEILL



Born March 9, 1978
Club Blackburn Rovers, England
Caps 20 **Goals** 0

Tough-tackling, versatile defender who has made the right-back spot his own, but is adaptable enough to play anywhere across the backline or even as a midfielder if needed. Has been a regular in the Blackburn side since moving there in the 2001-02 English Premier League season from Millwall, where Tim Cahill also made his name. Made his senior Qantas Socceroos in 1996 in a scoreless draw with Saudi Arabia in Riyadh. Missed the 2001 matches against Uruguay because of injury.

Defender

Tony POPOVIC

Born July 4, 1973
Club Crystal Palace, England
Caps 52 **Goals** 7

Veteran centre-back Popovic has long been the other half of Australia's first-choice central defensive pairing alongside Craig Moore. Like Moore, in recent times he has been hamstrung by injury, in his case calf problems. Strong, powerful and good in the air, Popovic also chimes in with the occasional goal, memorably getting on the scoresheet in February 2003 when Australia defeated England 3-1 at Upton Park. Made his international debut more than a decade ago in a 1-0 loss to Colombia in Sydney.

Defender

Mark SCHWARZER

Born October 6, 1972
Club Middlesbrough, England
Caps 34 **Goals** 0

Established himself as Australia's first-choice goalkeeper after Mark Bosnich fell out of the picture, and is now one of the English Premier League's top glove-men. Made his Qantas Socceroos debut in a World Cup qualifier in Canada in 1993 when the then 21-year-old became a national hero with his penalty shoot-out saves that took the Qantas Socceroos past the North Americans and into what ended up being a heartbreaking playoff with the Diego Maradona-inspired Argentina.

Goalkeeper

Josip SKOKO

Born December 10, 1975
Club Wigan Athletic, England
Caps 42 **Goals** 7

Skoko has been a key member of the Australian starting line-up since 1997, when he debuted against Macedonia. Has spent all of his senior career outside Australia, playing for Hajduk Split in Croatia, Racing Genk in Belgium and Genclerbirligi of Turkey before getting a move to Premiership side Wigan in August of this year. Played for Australia as an over-age player at the Sydney Olympics. Skoko is a good passer adept at setting up attacking opportunities for his team. Also chips in with occasional goals.

Midfielder

Archie THOMPSON

Born October 23, 1978
Club Melbourne Victory, Australia
Caps 15 **Goals** 20

Striker

Fast, sharp, with a good first touch and a high work rate, Thompson has been used mainly as an impact player off the bench since breaking through at international level in February 2001. Holder of the world record for the most number of goals in a World Cup qualifying match when he netted 13 times during Australia's 31-0 rout of American Samoa in the 2002 World Cup qualifier at Coffs Harbour. Prior to leaving for the first leg, he was one of the Hyundai A-League's leading scorers for the Melbourne Victory.

Michael THWAITE

Born May 2, 1983
Club FC National Bucuresti, Romania
Caps 1 **Goals** 0

Inexperienced centre-half who could be pressed into service after an impressive debut against Jamaica last month. He was in the squad for games against New Zealand in June before displaying his pace and strength against Jamaica. Began his career at Marconi in the NSL. Played in the 2004 Olympic Games qualifiers, and went to the under-20 World Youth Cup in the UAE in 2003.

Defender

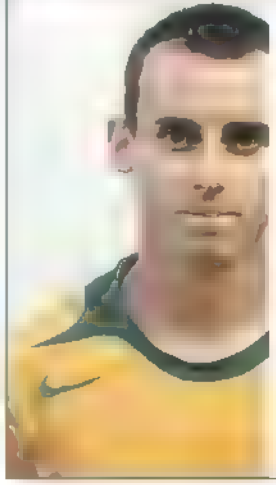
Mark VIDUKA

Born October 9, 1975
Club Middlesbrough, England
Caps 29 **Goals** 6

Striker

Named Australia's captain in the absence of Craig Moore, Viduka is desperate to make what will probably be his last World Cup qualifying campaign a success. The striker is blessed with sharp scoring instincts, although he has never been as prolific in national colours as he has been for his club teams. Made his senior debut in 1994 and has played in two Olympic Games, Atlanta in 1996 and Sydney in 2000. Also captained his country in the World Youth Cup in Qatar in 1995.

Luke WILKSHIRE



Born October 2, 1981
Club Bristol City, England
Caps 6 **Goals** 0

Hard-working midfielder who left English Premier League side Middlesbrough and dropped down the divisions in England to ensure he could play first-team football. Wilkshire has been part of the Australian squad since breaking through for his debut against the Solomon Islands in October 2004. Used mainly off the bench, the 24-year-old has made a solid contribution and has impressed coaching staff with his work ethic and tenacious tackling.

Midfielder

Tony VIDMAR

Born July 4, 1970
Club NAC Breda, Holland
Caps 73 **Goals** 3

Defender

The grand old man of Australian soccer, Vidmar has defied age and the critics to still be a major part of the Qantas Socceroos' defensive group. Has retained much of his pace, and is still as versatile as ever. Can play – and has – in either full-back position or as a centre-half. Made his international debut in a 2-0 loss to Czechoslovakia in Sydney in February 1991. Was part of the Olympic squad that made the semi-finals in Barcelona in 1992.

Guus HIDDINK

The Dutch master coach turned 59 earlier this month, and he could not have a better birthday present than a Qantas Socceroos win, which would take him to his third successive World Cup, each time with a different country. Hiddink is best known for achieving what many regarded as the impossible: taking South Korea to the semi-finals of the 2002 World Cup. Given that it had never won a match in the World Cup finals before, it's easy to see why he enjoys the status of a semi-deity in South Korea. Hiddink is also the head coach/manager at PSV Eindhoven, the team he took to the semi-finals of the Champions League last season.

Head Coach

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AUSTRALIA

QANTAS SOCCEROOS

NO.	NAME	POSITION	GOALS
1	Mark Schwarzer	Goalkeeper	
2	Lucas Neill	Defender	
3	Scott Chipperfield	Defender/Midfielder	
4	Tim Cahill	Midfielder	
5	Tony Vidmar	Defender	
6	Tony Popovic	Defender	
7	Brett Emerton	Midfielder	
8	Josip Skoko	Midfielder	
9	Mark Viduka	Forward	
10	Harry Kewell	Midfielder/Forward	
11	Stan Lazaridis	Defender/Midfielder	
12	Ljubo Milicevic	Defender	
13	Vince Grella	Midfielder	
14	Archie Thompson	Forward	
15	John Aloisi	Forward	
16	Michael Thwaite	Defender	
17	Joel Griffiths	Forward	
18	Zeljko Kalac	Goalkeeper	
19	Jason Culina	Midfielder	
20	Luke Wilkshire	Defender/Midfielder	
21	Ahmad Elrich	Midfielder	
23	Marco Bresciano	Midfielder	
GK	Ante Covic	Goalkeeper	

Head of Delegation Phillip Wolanski **Head Coach** Guus Hiddink **Coach** Graham Arnold **Goalkeeper Coach** Tony Franken
Team Manager Gary Moretti **Strength/Conditioner** Anthony Crea **National Technical Manager** Ron Smith
Doctor Dr Andrew Jowett **Senior Physiotherapist** Les Geus **Physiotherapist** Arno Phillips **Masseur** Luke Attwell
Media Manager Stuart Hodge **TV Unit** Lindsay McNeill **Equipment Manager** Dominic Rabsch

Team Score

half-time	full-time

URUGUAY

NO.	NAME	POSITION	GOALS
	Fabian Carini	Goalkeeper	
	Sebastian Abreu	Forward	
	Gonzalo De Los Santos	Midfielder	
	Carlos Diogo	Midfielder	
	Fabian Estoyanoff	Forward	
	Diego Forlan	Forward	
	Pablo Garcia	Midfielder	
	Alejandro Lago	Defender	
	Martin Ligüera	Midfielder	
	Diego Lopez	Defender	
	Diego Lugano	Defender	
	Paolo Montero	Defender	
	Oscar Javier Morales	Midfielder	
	Richard Morales	Forward	
	Richard Nunez	Forward	
	Martin Parodi	Midfielder	
	Diego Perez	Midfielder	
	Alvaro Recoba	Midfielder	
	Mario Regueiro	Forward	
	Dario Rodriguez	Defender	
	Guillermo Rodriguez	Defender	
	Vicente Sanchez	Forward	
	Dario Silva	Forward	
	Marcelo Sosa	Midfielder	
	Gustavo Varela	Midfielder	
	Sebastian Viera	Goalkeeper	
	Marcelo Zalayeta	Forward	

MATCH OFFICIALS Referee – Luis Medina Cantalejo (Spain) **Assistant Referee –** Victoriano Giraldez Carrasco (Spain)
Assistant Referee – Pedro Medina Hernandez (Spain) **Fourth Official –** Julian Rodriguez Santiago (Spain)

Team Score

half-time	full-time

URUGUAY PLAYER PROFILES

Sebastian ABREU

Born October 17, 1976
Club Sinaloa, Mexico
Caps 20 **Goals** 11

As physical as strikers come, Abreu is rightly known as "the madman" and is sure to cause mayhem in the Australian defence if he plays. Has twice been the top scorer in the Mexican league, but failed to make the grade in his brief spell with Deportivo la Coruna in Spain

Forward

Fabian CARINI

Born December 26, 1979
Club Cagliari, Italy
Caps 39 **Goals** 0

A mainstay of the team for more than four years, Carini established himself as the No.1 keeper in his homeland while playing for top domestic side Danubio. Was outstanding against Argentina in the 1-0 win that gave them the playoff spot.

Goalkeeper

Gonzalo DE LOS SANTOS

Born July 7, 1976
Club Valencia, Spain
Caps 48 **Goals** 1

A skilful midfielder who can play on the left, but is more effective in his preferred central role. Has regained his place in the squad after missing out on the last Copa America campaign. Joined Spanish side Valencia in 2001 but has only played one season for the club after loan spells with rival teams Mallorca and Atletico Madrid

Midfield

Carlos DIOGO

Born July 18, 1983
Club Real Madrid, Spain
Caps 13 **Goals** 0

Signed by Real Madrid in the summer, Diogo has struggled to displace Robert Carlos from the left-back role. Has been a regular with the national team for two years but needs to play more regular football to stand up to the Australian attack.

Defender

Fabian ESTOYANOFF

Born September 27, 1982
Club Cadiz, Spain
Caps 22 **Goals** 4

A quick and skilful playmaker who has flourished since moving to Spanish side Cadiz. Should challenge Recoba for a place if the inter player suffers from his regular inconsistent form

Midfield

Diego FORLAN

Born May 19, 1979
Club Villarreal, Spain
Caps 20 **Goals** 9

Uruguay's main goal threat. Has a huge bag of tricks at his disposal and can score from anywhere with either foot. His career looked like it was over after a being branded a flop at Manchester United, but he reinvented himself in Spain, winning the European golden boot last season.

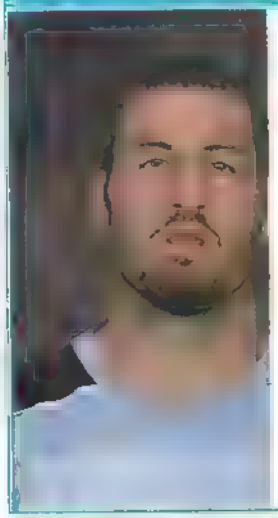
Forward

Pablo GARCIA

Born May 11, 1977
Club Real Madrid, Spain
Caps 42 **Goals** 1

Manager Jorge Fossati called Garcia Uruguay's best player of the qualifying campaign. He moved from Osasuna to Real Madrid in the summer and has been a regular for 'El Galacticos'. He is a no-nonsense midfielder who will relish a midfield clash with Tim Cahill.

Alejandro LAGO



Born June 28, 1979
Club Rosenborg, Norway
Caps 18 **Goals** 0

A towering presence in defence, Lago left his tropical homeland for the cold climate of Norway, and his chances with the national team have suffered as a result. Has learned his combative style from captain Montero and amazingly played 40 minutes of a match in September with a broken wrist.

Martin LAÚDA

Born November 11, 1980
Club San Luis, Mexico
Caps 17 **Goals** 7

Another solid midfielder. Moved back across the Atlantic after an unsuccessful spell with Mallorca in Spain, and has seen his international chances improve as a result. Started in the recent friendly defeat by Mexico.

Diego LOPEZ

Born August 22, 1974
Club Cagliari, Italy
Caps 1 **Goals** 0

Lopez shares Montero's ruthless streak but, like his teammate, his toughness is his greatest asset. Has been a regular for his Italian club since he arrived nearly 10 years ago.

Diego LUGANO

Born November 2, 1980
Club Sao Paulo, Braz
Caps 7 **Goals** 0

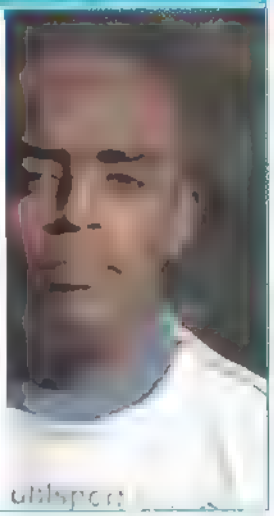
Lugano is a consistent performer who brings calm to the defence, contrasting with Montero's aggression. Has attracted interest from both European champions Liverpool and Spanish side Sevilla, and will face the former in the World Club Championships in December.

Paolo MONTERO

Born December 31, 1969
Club San Lorenzo, Argentina
Caps 57 **Goals** 5

Montero set new all-time records for red and yellow cards during his 13-year spell in Italy with Atalanta and Juventus, but won a Champions League, a World Club Championships cup and multiple domestic titles. His desire to win cannot be doubted, but his fiery temperament can make his teammates worry that he will not make the end of a game.

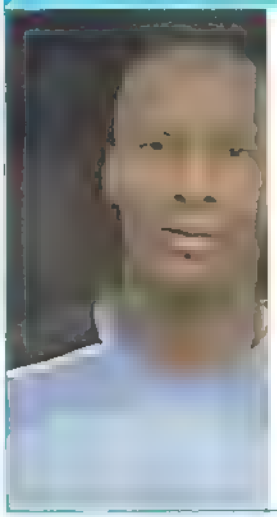
Oscar Javier MORALES



Born March 29, 1975
Club Valladolid, Spain
Caps 2 **Goals** 0

A versatile player who can switch between attacking and defensive midfield roles and is just as comfortable with either foot. Morales may only play in the Spanish second division, but has been in outstanding form this season and has won his place back in the national team as a result.

Richard MORALES



Born February 21, 1975
Club Malaga, Spain
Caps 17 **Goals** 6

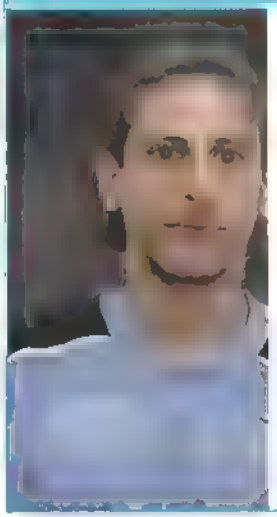
Morales is a calm presence on the pitch but has a reputation as a wild man off it. He can play as an out-and-out striker or on either wing. Scored twice against Australia in the playoff four years ago.

Richard NUNEZ

Born February 16, 1976
Club Cruz Azul, Mexico
Caps 10 **Goals** 0

Like midfielder Liguera, Nunez has returned to the other side of the Atlantic after a few years in the Swiss and Spanish leagues. A poacher who has made a habit of scoring crucial goals at club level.

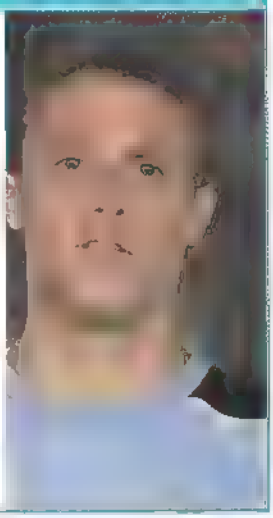
Martin PARODI



Born September 22, 1974
Club Nacional, Uruguay
Caps 3 **Goals** 0

Returned to his home and this year after spells in Greece and Paraguay. Can play in defence but is more at home in midfield where he can show off his passing ability. He is unlikely to be chosen ahead of Garcia and Varela.

Diego PEREZ



Born May 18, 1980
Club Monaco, France
Caps 21 **Goals** 0

Another of the squad who made a move to the glamour of the European leagues. Unfortunately, he joined too late to be a part of the squad that surprised everyone by making the Champions League final. The sometimes over-aggressive midfielder has been used mainly as a substitute for both club and country this season.

Alvaro RECOBA

Born March 17, 1976
Club Inter Milan, Italy
Caps 57 **Goals** 9

Recoba was dropped from the team for manager Fossatti's first game in January, and netted only six times for his club last season. Returned to score the winner against Argentina to set up the tie against Australia and is deadly with his left foot.

Mario REGUEIRO

Born September 14, 1978
Club Valencia, Spain
Caps 28 **Goals** 0

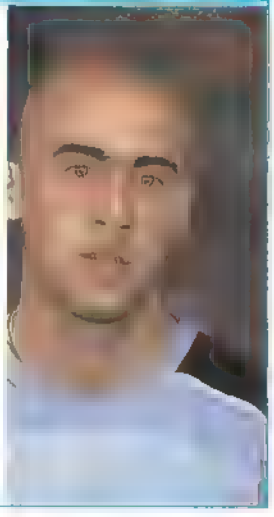
Australian fans will remember him as the man who terrorised Kevin Muscat when the sides last met in 2001. Has a terrific left foot but has had his appearances limited since Fossati changed the formation. Not a prolific goal scorer but his manager sees him more as a provider than a finisher.

Dario RODRIGUEZ

Born September 17, 1974
Club Schalke 04, Germany
Caps 20 **Goals** 2

A regular for his country but no longer for his club, Rodriguez has been pushed down the order by younger teammates. He can play anywhere in the defence but is most effective as a full-back. He is dangerous with his head and an excellent crosser.

Guillermo RODRIGUEZ



Born Aged 20
Club Atlas, Mexico
Caps 10 **Goals** 0

A recent addition to the squad, the young defender has impressed with his performances for Atlas. A big future beckons, but he will find it difficult to break up the established partnership of Lugano and Montero just yet.

Vicente SANCHEZ

Born December 7, 1979
Club Toluca, Mexico
Caps 11 **Goals** 1

The only squad member to play his club football in Central America, Sanchez is renowned for covering every blade of grass during a match, but despite his energy levels, he is unlikely to start unless injuries to others prevail.

Pablo SILVA

Born December 2, 1972
Club Portsmouth, England
Caps 46 **Goals** 14

A powerhouse forward in the Mark Viduka mould, Silva retired from international football in March after an argument with manager Fossati, but apologised recently and sat on the bench against Argentina. Is not the player he was four years ago when he terrorised Marcel Desailly's French team at the 2002 World Cup.

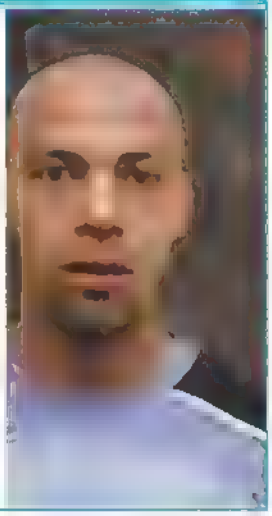
Marcelo TOSA

Born June 2, 1978
Club Osasuna, Spain
Caps 29 **Goals** 1

Bought by Osasuna in the summer to replace international compatriot Pablo Garcia after the latter moved to Real Madrid. A midfield workhorse, he is the only squad member who can claim to have played club football in Russia, after a spell with Spartak Moscow.

Gustavo VARELA

Born May 14, 1978
Club Schalke 04, Germany
Caps 9 **Goals** 0



A tough tackler, Varela's usual position sees him sit in front of the defence and allows midfield partner Garcia to make runs forward. He won four domestic titles in five years in his homeland before moving to German side Schalke 04.

Midfield

Sebastian VIERA

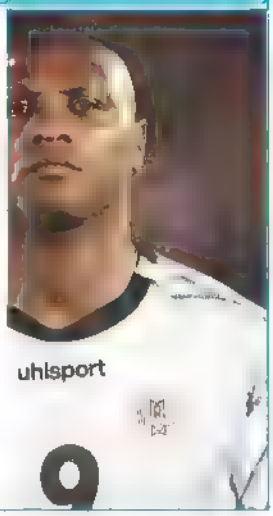
Born July 3, 1983
Club Villarreal, Spain
Caps 10 **Goals** 0

Viera was prevented from joining English club Arsenal in July when club medics found a cyst on his hip, but he put it behind him to seal a move to Spanish side Villarreal one month later. An expert in one-on-one situations, his regular Champions League appearances could see him displace Canni

Goalkeeper

Marcelo ZALAYETA

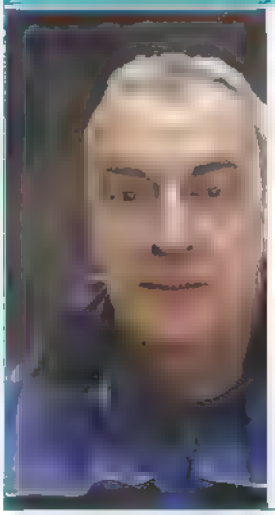
Born December 5, 1978
Club Juventus, Italy
Caps 24 **Goals** 7



His stunning appearance as a substitute in the 2003 Champions League final turned him from a bit-player to a team regular for Juventus. Will run all day, but whether 'Il panterone' (the big panther) faces Alcstral a depends on the formation his side chooses

Forward

Jorge FOSSATI



A controversial figure with a reputation for taking rash decisions and ruing the consequences. Arguments led to the international retirements of both Diego Forlan and Dario Silva, and only intense pressure from the fans forced him to apologise and invite them back. Demands instant results from his players and is not afraid to drop big names if they fail to perform

Manager

The talisman

On his day, Uruguay's Alvaro Recoba is among the best in the world. So, it's little wonder his country's fortunes rest on his slim shoulders.

By Matthew Hall

One thing is imperative if Australia is to qualify for next year's FIFA World Cup in Germany: Uruguayan star Alvaro Recoba, who is, believe it or not, a keen angler, must not be allowed to reel in Australia's defence. If the attacking midfielder lands anything tonight, let it be the football equivalent of a blowfish, a rusty tin can or an old car tyre.

But respect where it's due. On his night, Recoba is one of the best footballers in the world and capable of demolishing Australia on his own. There are some Australian fans who, having watched the Qantas Socceroos be pulled apart by Recoba in Montevideo four years ago, have woken from nightmares over the past few nights in anticipation of tonight's match.

An image of Recoba still sticks. Sitting on a crossbar at the Centenario Stadium, he is celebrating his match-winning contribution to Uruguay's 3-0 demolition job against Frank Farina's Australians. On that day, Recoba left his fishing rod at home, but instead turned up wearing a magician's hat.

The Inter Milan dynamo provided two magical moments that sealed the 2001 tie. His free kick in the 70th minute delivered a precision ball for Richard Morales to head past Mark Schwarzer. Twenty minutes later, Recoba weaved past Australia's defence to again set up Morales for another goal. Cue Australian tears.

In the aftermath of Uruguay's win over Argentina in October, a 1-0 result that sealed Los Celeste as Australia's World Cup playoff rivals, newspapers in Buenos Aires hailed the playmaker as the difference between the two teams.

"Recoba was the key for Uruguay continuing to dream about the World Cup," wrote Argentine daily newspaper *Clarin*. "The Inter Milan left-sided midfielder scored a goal that was worthy of the playoff place. He was his team's best player on the night."

Recoba said of his performance against Argentina, "I think I can say I scored the most important goal of my career – but only if we qualify for the World Cup. If we don't, it won't be of any use.

Recoba's time at Inter Milan has frustrated fans and coaches alike.

"That goal was for my whole family – my wife, my children, my parents and my brothers and sisters," he added. "It's them who suffer when things aren't going for the best. I'm also dedicating my goal to the whole of Uruguay and all the people who love me."

That's the bad news. Here's the good: While he's considered Uruguay's guiding light, Recoba is also an infuriatingly inconsistent player. As any Inter fan will tell you, during his nine seasons in Italy it's been hard to know just which version will turn up for the Serie A giants.

Prima donna? Possibly. Supporters say he may just be misunderstood. Recoba said at the beginning of this season he would flourish in attack at the San Siro if the club didn't add to its stock of strikers. Recoba is one of Inter coach Roberto Mancini's four attacking options, alongside Brazilian wizard Adriano, Nigerian Obafemi Martins and Argentine Julio Cruz.

"The only important thing this year is Inter, not Recoba," the Uruguayan said at the start of the season. "I won't cause any trouble if I'm left out of the team or after being substituted. I won't question any of Roberto Mancini's decisions."

The truth is Recoba's time at Inter has included more highs and lows than a tropical weather chart. Some go so far as to say his time there has been wasted. No other player has promised so much and delivered so little.

Recoba made his debut for Inter on the same day as Ronaldo and dutifully upstaged the Brazilian. Then unknown outside of Uruguay, he scored two long-range goals to seal an Inter win. He also scored from a Beckham-like halfway line shot the following week to ensure all Italian football fans knew his name.

Recoba made his debut for Inter the same day as Ronaldo and upstaged the Brazilian. He scored two long-range goals to seal an Inter win.

Recoba, nicknamed "El Chino" (the Chinaman) for his Asian looks, scored 62 goals in 58 games for Uruguay national league side Danubio as a youngster, making his debut as a 16-year-old. He fast became the Uruguay national league's most-wanted player, joined giants Nacional before leaving for the Serie A in 1997.

Recoba made his first international appearance against Spain in January 1995 at the age of 19. Perhaps the difference between his free-flowing international career and stuttering club trajectory is that the national team is built around him. With a club like Inter, Recoba is just one of 11 superstars, maybe more.

The theory gained credence during a six-month loan spell at Venezia in 1999, when Recoba almost single-handedly orchestrated the club's Serie A survival. As the team's kingpin, he hauled the modest side from certain relegation to a respectable mid-table position, bagging 11 goals in 19 games on the way.

Periods of sun and shadow seem to mark his career. Recoba was rewarded on his return to Inter from Venezia with a contract that made him (albeit briefly) the highest-paid player in the world. Yet, the following year

Recoba triumphant after the World Cup playoff against Australia in 2001.

he was one of three Inter players to volunteer for a pay cut to help alev ate the club's financial woes.

"He's a gen us, but l ke al geniuses Recoba has the ability to make you jump for joy or make you angry with rage," Inter coach Roberto Mancin said. "We should just appreciate those moments in which his head and his feet are working in tandem."

Recoba's time at nter has also been marked by scandal In 2000, he was suspended for one year by the Italian league - although the ban was reduced to four months on appeal – for his nvolvement in a fake passport scam

The player was one of several South Americans, including current Inter teammate Juan Veron, who had claimed a European Union passport, a prized document that allows clubs to use im ported players as "locals" Recoba's Italian heritage, however, was fictitious. El Chino had also claimed he'd unknowingly acqu red the false passport and that his crime did not compare with performance-enhanc ng drug abuse, also prevalent in Italy at the time

"It's a serious matter to have a false passport, but is a lesser ssue than doping," he said at the time of his appeal. "Neither I, nor Inter, acted in bad faith. it's clear that we put our trust in the wrong people, and at the end, it was us who paid "

Unfortunately for Australia, Recoba's ban was lifted in August 2001, time enough for him to resume duty with his national team and prove something of a point by help ng to end Australia's 2002 World Cup hopes with a dazz ng return to the pitch

If Recoba has an Australian mirror, Harry Kewell may fit the image perfectly Both are brilliant left-footed players, talismans for their teams. And ,ust ke Kewe l, Recoba had a difficult time last season He made ,ust 13 appearances for Inter and, while Kewe l played at least a sma l ro e in Liverpool's Champions League Final win, Recoba was absent when nter cla med the Coppa talia Strugg ng with f tness, he even quit the nat ona team a year ago

"I don't want to carry on disappointing people," he sa d "At the moment, it's best for everyone f I give the nationa team a rest When i get back to full fitness and fee ready to give my best, then I can return."

As h s performance against Argentina demonstrated, Recoba s back As fans, we adm re h.s talent. As Australians, we'd like the football gods to give E Ch no the n ght off After all, there's plenty of good fish ng spots in Australia, especially around Sydney. And that's as far as local hospitality should be extended. ⧗

As his performance against Argentina demonstrated, Recoba is back. As fans, we admire his talent. As Australians, we'd like the gods to give "El Chino" the night off.

Winning Partnership

The Australian Sports Commission is the Australian Government agency responsible for the funding and development of sport in Australia. Through its two main programs – the Australian Institute of Sport, and Sport Performance and Development – the Australian Sports Commission supports a wide range of initiatives designed to develop sporting excellence and increase participation in sport by all Australians.

Football Federation Australia is one of more than 65 national sporting organisations that have formed winning partnerships with the Australian Sports Commission to develop their sports in Australia.

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Australian Government

Australian Sports Commission

THE AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMMISSION PROUDLY SUPPORTS FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA

SP 31079

Australia have a playoff curse to lift when they play Uruguay tonight. It is a curse that has seen them lose World Cup playoffs in 1985, 1993, 1997 and 2001; a curse that has not been broken since Australia last made the World Cup finals in 1974.

It was Uruguay who ended their last World Cup fairytale in 2001, hammering the Qantas Socceroos 3-0 at home after some players reported being spat at by fans.

And, sadly for Australia, the double World Cup winners have an elf and an ogre who are hoping to retain the curse and see the national side return home with a fourth successive playoff defeat.

The Ogre

Paolo Montero is a formidable defender who is infamous for picking up the most red cards in Italian football history. But more than his ill-discipline, Montero should be known for winning five Serie A championships with Juventus and marshalling what has been one of the meanest defences in Europe.

Montero also knows about shutting down Australians. In 2001, the likes of Mark Viduka and Harry Kewell were not given a sniff of a chance when they arrived at Montevideo's Estadio Centenario and faced Montero in his prime.

"Beating Australia in the playoff was an unbelievable feeling," he says. "It was a tough game, but in the second leg we played remarkably well and deserved to go through."

Double trouble

The yin and yang of Uruguayan football – hard-nosed realism and breathtaking beauty – are embodied in defender Paolo Montero and forward Diego Forlan.

By Toby Skinner and Amar Azan

Montero will be want to make an impact in what is likely to be his last World Cup.
(Opposite page) Montero shaking hands with Mark Viduka in 2001.

"We have a tough match against Australia because they want to beat us after we beat them to reach the last World Cup. We must be stronger than them to win" – Diego Forlan

And while the ogre is ageing, at 34, he will be deter[illegible] impact in what will surely be his last chance [illegible] World Cup.

"Playing in a World Cup is an incredible thing [illegible] small country, but a very proud one. Football can help distract [illegible] of life's harsh realities like the current fin[illegible]

Montero is not just proud of his [illegible] her tage. His father Julio Montero was a Uruguayan [illegible] of the highly successful Nacional Montevideo [illegible] early 1970s and he instilled in his son a desire to [illegible]

"It's all born from my desire to be a winner. S[illegible] to do anything to win, and this is my nature, he adds [illegible] American, I grew up with my philosophy that foot[illegible] and about winning, however you do it."

It is a philosophy that Uruguay's defens[illegible] him into trouble, especially with Italian referees [illegible] 19 times in his nine seasons with Juventus [illegible]

[illegible] let myself down at times. It's a says of [illegible] almost two complete campaigns [illegible]

The Elf

At the other end of the pitch from Montero is the very different Diego [illegible] hope to plunder. Aussie possession by force [illegible] by stealth and cunning [illegible] of pretty football [illegible] Like Montero, his [illegible] national team in the 1974 World Cup. [illegible]

[illegible] wrong for the 26-year-old striker when [illegible] in 2002 and was blown away by the [illegible] and the pace and strength of the [illegible]

Forlan struggled in his time with Manchester United but has since returned to form.

Montero says he grew up with a philosophy that football is "about winning, however you do it".

his £6.5 million move from Argentinean side Independiente, and only scored 17 goals in 95 appearances for the Old Trafford club.

But after a 2004 move to Spanish Primera Liga club Villarreal, he went from being dubbed "Diego Forlorn" to winning the golden shoe award for the most league goals in Europe last year, with 25 in the season.

"I did not expect to score so many goals at Villarreal," he admits. "In England I had more pressure. When I arrived, the fans expected two goals each game.

"Like every striker, I need to be scoring goals. And by doing that, I'm helping the team to win and that makes me feel better. Goals take the pressure off."

Strangely, though, for a man who had such a lean time in England, Forlan has fond memories of the Premiership and would like to return to English football once more to prove his doubters wrong.

"I am very happy in Spain, and to be top scorer in my first season is an achievement I am proud of," he says. "But I know one day I will return to England and I wish it was at United.

"I have really good memories of my time there and (Sir Alex) Ferguson is my biggest memory there. The name says it all. It is a well-known name associated with the club, despite it being so big. That has the biggest impact when you arrive there."

While Montero will hope to plunder Aussie possession by force, the elf Forlan will look to beat them by stealth, cunning and pretty football.

After his irregular United appearances reduced his role in the national team to little more than bit-part, the frustration of long-haul flights home just to sit on the bench soon became apparent. It was a most exactly a year ago when he held a meeting with manager Jorge Fossati to reveal his decision to retire from international football aged just 25.

Poor results followed and by the spring it appeared that Colombia or even Chile would steal Uruguay's fifth place in the South American qualifying zone. Fossati initially resisted calls to ask the now free-scoring Forlan to reconsider his decision. In March, the player returned to the squad, making an instant impact and creating Alvaro Recoba's goal against Argentina that set up the playoff.

"I came back because there was a chance to help my country to reach the World Cup finals," he says. "Now we have a tough match against Australia because they want to beat us after we beat them to reach the last World Cup.

"I have played against many of the players from my experiences with Manchester United. Mark Viduka and Brett Emerton are very physical players, so we must be stronger than them to win." ✖

Toby Skinner and Amar Azan write for Collings Sport in the UK

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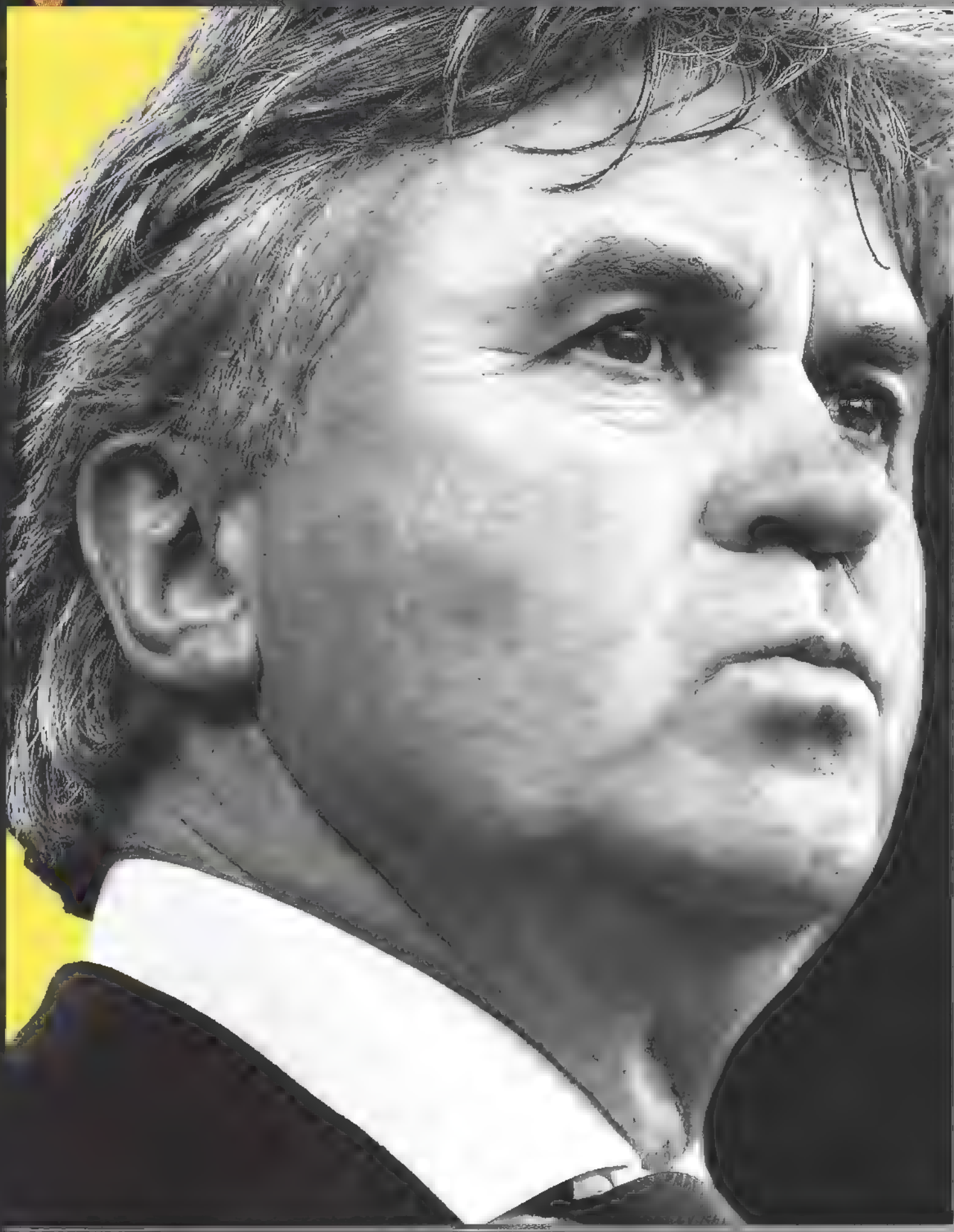


Miracle man

Coach Guus Hiddink has given teams Cinderella makeovers in the past – and Australia is hoping he can do the same with the Qantas Socceroos.

By Michael Lynch

Dutch supercoach Guus Hiddink is, he admits, a stickler for detail and a perfectionist. Even after the Qantas Socceroos had romped to an absurdly easy 5-0 victory over a disappointing Jamaican side in London last month, he knew that much more would be required against a stronger, seasoned South American opponent in the Qantas Socceroos' most important two games in the past four years.

"I am always critical, even now I am looking to some point of criticism," he said after the game. "I am always looking at the details. There are little details, but I am very sharp on that."

Hiddink, with his imposing record of success, knows only too well that at the highest levels of the game – top club football in the European Champions League, or in the World Cup itself – God (or perhaps the Devil) is in the detail.

The man from Varsseveld in the eastern part of the Netherlands – known colloquially as the "back corner" – was born on November 8, 1946, to a schoolteacher father. He was one of a large family of six boys who, according to the authoritative Dutch writer Simon Kuper, grew up wanting to be a farmer. But Hiddink turned his attention to football in his late teens because there were limited career opportunities in the country's declining rural sector.

Hiddink was handy as a player, but nothing more. Beginning with his local amateur club Varsseveld, he was then picked up by one of the region's bigger teams, De Graafschap. A midfielder, Hiddink was said to be a decent passer. But he lacked the pace required to succeed at the top level, even though his performances at De Graafschap did earn him a move to one of Holland's biggest clubs, PSV Eindhoven.

He spent a year at PSV before heading back home to De Graafschap where he remained until 1976. He then embarked on what at the time was a rather exotic football adventure to the US. There, Hiddink played with and against stars like George Best in the North American Soccer League. He turned out for the Washington Diplomats and the San Francisco Earthquakes before returning to the Netherlands to play for another current Eredivisie (Dutch premier league) side, NEC Nijmegen.

Hiddink has achieved success at all levels of coaching.

Hiddink celebrates with Korean players after beating Portugal in the 2002 World Cup

At the age of 41 he had achieved the pinnacle of success as a club coach in Europe, and took PSV to three Dutch league titles between 1987 and 1990.

Hiddink finished his playing career in 1981 with a move back to where it all started, De Graafschap, which is also where he refined and developed his coaching techniques.

He rejoined PSV as an assistant coach, finally taking on the head coaching position in 1987. One year later, he led them to their first European Cup triumph, ensuring they matched the feat of the Netherlands' other two big clubs, Feyenoord of Rotterdam and Ajax Amsterdam, who had both won Europe's greatest club trophy in the 1970s. At the age of 41 he had achieved the pinnacle of success as a club coach in Europe, and took PSV to three Dutch league titles between 1987 and 1990.

Hiddink then sought fresh challenges and found them in Turkey. A country full of passionate, fervent fans, it is far removed from the cool cultured Dutch football style.

But his time in charge at Fenerbance, one of Turkey's biggest teams ended after only a year and he swiftly moved on to Spain's Primera Liga, where he took charge of Valencia. Never afraid to speak his mind – a characteristic shared by most of the Dutch footballers of his generation – Hiddink once ordered a racist banner to be removed from the stands at the club's Mestalla Stadium.

It was only a matter of time before he would be tempted by the prospect of managing at international level, and the call came from his native Netherlands in 1995. He took the talented Dutch side to the European Championships in 1996 but, as has often been the case, the team was racked by internal wrangling that cut at morale.

Hiddink famously had a bust up with key midfielder Edgar Davids and was sent home. The Dutch crashed to a heavy defeat against England in the group stages, and were out of the tournament when they lost to France on penalties in the quarter-finals after a scoreless draw.

However, Hiddink showed he was not a man to harbour grudges two years later. The Netherlands, with Davids restored to the team and Hiddink in the dugout, reached the last four of the World Cup – only to lose on penalties to Brazil after a 1-1 draw.

A switch back to club football followed. Hiddink returned to Spain and spent a season at Real Madrid and then Real Betis in Seville before the lure of international football once again proved too tempting.

In the 1998 World Cup, the Netherlands had smashed South Korea 5-0 in a group game. The Koreans were impressed and, with the World Cup due to be staged in their own country in 2002, they were determined to secure the best coach they could and pursued Hiddink. He duly agreed to take control of the hitherto underachieving Koreans on January 1, 2001 and set about creating one of the biggest upsets in world football.

Hiddink is a coach who likes a fast-paced, mobile, fluent and attacking style. He likes his teams to defend from the front, playing a pressing game that puts pressure on the opposition in their defensive third of the field as soon as his team loses possession.

He likes his defenders to push forward, crowding the space in which the opposition attackers and midfielders can play, and he also values speed and width, preferring to utilise out-and-out wingers or forwards who are capable of playing in wide positions.

Taking over a Korean side with little international success or experience was in some ways going back to basics, but it also allowed him to work with the sort of blank canvas he would not have had with another international team.

He had the players in camp with him for long periods, instilling in them the uptempo, energetic style in which he wanted them to play. He also acted as an agent of cultural change, altering the deference mentality within the squad that saw the young players offer exaggerated respect to the older, established members of the team, dropping some of the more senior players to shake things up.

The Hiddink makeover almost produced a miracle. The Koreans marched to the semi-finals, coming through as unbeaten winners of a group that included the US, Poland and Portugal, defeating Italy and Spain along the way before finally succumbing to Germany in the semi-finals.

The Asians desperately wanted him to stay in charge, but he returned to Holland and back to PSV. In the Netherlands, he showed he had lost none of his touch in club football, guiding PSV to the semi-finals of the Champions League last season where they were extremely unlucky to be eliminated by AC Milan.

But the siren call of the World Cup was never far away. When FFA boss John O'Neill renewed his approach (Hiddink had been sounded out in 2002 and 2003 about becoming Australia's technical director) and asked Hiddink to coach the Qantas Socceroos on a part time basis, he could not resist.

Hiddink knew making the World Cup would be no easy task. There have been very few games – one against Jamaica and two against the Solomon Islands – for him to work with the players and instil his football principles of organisation, flexibility and tactical awareness, to add to the passion, commitment and physical approach that he so admires from all Australian sportsmen.

Back in July when he was appointed, he joked that it would take a miracle to get Australia to the World Cup.

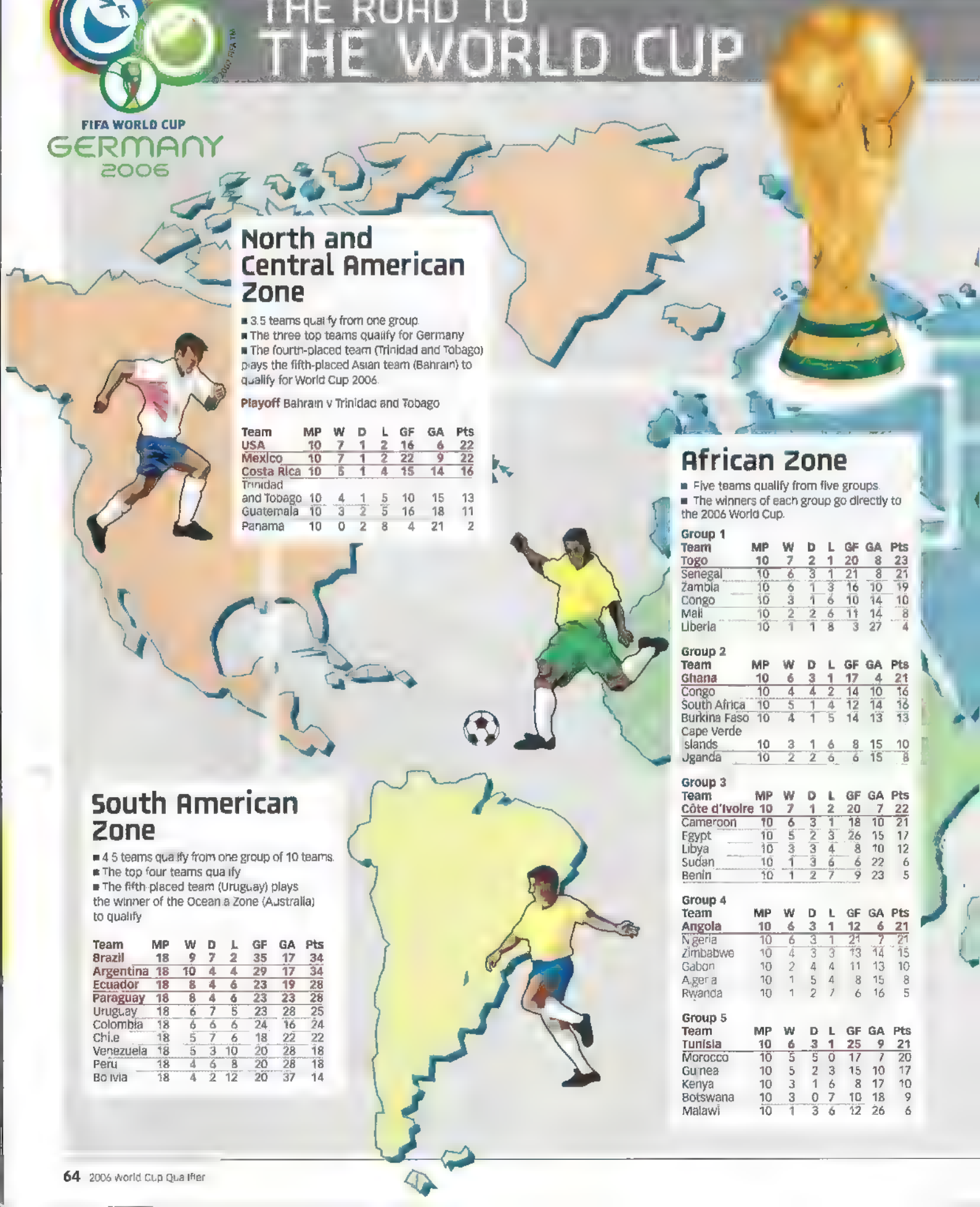
Now is the time he can not only prove he can achieve the impossible, as he did with Korea, but that he can also work miracles. ✖

Michael Lynch is chief footbal writer for The Age *in Melbourne*

Right: Hiddink and the Australian team during their 5-0 defeat of Jamaica.

THE ROAD TO THE WORLD CUP

FIFA WORLD CUP GERMANY 2006



North and Central American Zone

- 3.5 teams qualify from one group
- The three top teams qualify for Germany
- The fourth-placed team (Trinidad and Tobago) plays the fifth-placed Asian team (Bahrain) to qualify for World Cup 2006

Playoff Bahrain v Trinidad and Tobago

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
USA	10	7	1	2	16	6	22
Mexico	10	7	1	2	22	9	22
Costa Rica	10	5	1	4	15	14	16
Trinidad and Tobago	10	4	1	5	10	15	13
Guatemala	10	3	2	5	16	18	11
Panama	10	0	2	8	4	21	2

South American Zone

- 4.5 teams qualify from one group of 10 teams.
- The top four teams qualify
- The fifth-placed team (Uruguay) plays the winner of the Oceania Zone (Australia) to qualify

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Brazil	18	9	7	2	35	17	34
Argentina	18	10	4	4	29	17	34
Ecuador	18	8	4	6	23	19	28
Paraguay	18	8	4	6	23	23	28
Uruguay	18	6	7	5	23	28	25
Colombia	18	6	6	6	24	16	24
Chile	18	5	7	6	18	22	22
Venezuela	18	5	3	10	20	28	18
Peru	18	4	6	8	20	28	18
Bolivia	18	4	2	12	20	37	14

African Zone

- Five teams qualify from five groups.
- The winners of each group go directly to the 2006 World Cup.

Group 1

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Togo	10	7	2	1	20	8	23
Senegal	10	6	3	1	21	8	21
Zambia	10	6	1	3	16	10	19
Congo	10	3	1	6	10	14	10
Mali	10	2	2	6	11	14	8
Liberia	10	1	1	8	3	27	4

Group 2

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Ghana	10	6	3	1	17	4	21
Congo	10	4	4	2	14	10	16
South Africa	10	5	1	4	12	14	16
Burkina Faso	10	4	1	5	14	13	13
Cape Verde Islands	10	3	1	6	8	15	10
Uganda	10	2	2	6	6	15	8

Group 3

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Côte d'Ivoire	10	7	1	2	20	7	22
Cameroon	10	6	3	1	18	10	21
Egypt	10	5	2	3	26	15	17
Libya	10	3	3	4	8	10	12
Sudan	10	1	3	6	6	22	6
Benin	10	1	2	7	9	23	5

Group 4

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Angola	10	6	3	1	12	6	21
Nigeria	10	6	3	1	21	7	21
Zimbabwe	10	4	3	3	13	14	15
Gabon	10	2	4	4	11	13	10
Algeria	10	1	5	4	8	15	8
Rwanda	10	1	2	7	6	16	5

Group 5

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Tunisia	10	6	3	1	25	9	21
Morocco	10	5	5	0	17	7	20
Guinea	10	5	2	3	15	10	17
Kenya	10	3	1	6	8	17	10
Botswana	10	3	0	7	10	18	9
Malawi	10	1	3	6	12	26	6

European Zone

- 13 teams qualify (Germany qualifies automatically as host) from eight groups.
- The winner of each group and the two best second-placed teams qualify
- The other six second-placed teams are drawn against each other for three playoff matches to determine the final three qualifiers.

Playoffs
Czech Republic v Norway,
Turkey v Switzerland, Slovakia v Spain

Group 1

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Netherlands	12	10	2	0	27	3	32
Czech Republic	12	9	0	3	35	12	27
Romania	12	8	1	3	20	10	25
Finland	12	5	1	6	21	19	16
Macedonia FYR	12	2	3	7	11	24	9
Armenia	12	2	1	9	9	25	7
Andorra	12	1	2	9	4	34	5

Group 2

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Ukraine	12	7	4	1	18	7	25
Turkey	12	6	5	1	23	9	23
Denmark	12	6	4	2	24	12	22
Greece	12	6	3	3	15	9	21
Albania	12	4	1	7	11	20	13
Georgia	12	2	4	6	14	25	10
Kazakhstan	12	0	1	11	6	29	1

Group 3

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Portugal	12	9	3	0	35	5	30
Slovakia	12	6	5	1	24	8	23
Russia	12	6	5	1	23	12	23
Estonia	12	5	2	5	16	17	17
Latvia	12	4	3	5	18	21	15
Liechtenstein	12	2	2	8	13	23	8
Luxembourg	12	0	0	12	5	48	0

Group 4

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
France	10	5	5	0	14	2	20
Switzerland	10	4	6	0	18	7	18
Israel	10	4	6	0	15	10	18
Rep. of Ireland	10	4	5	1	12	5	17
Cyprus	10	1	1	8	8	20	4
Faroe Islands	10	0	1	9	4	27	1

Group 5

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Italy	10	7	2	1	17	8	23
Norway	10	5	3	2	12	7	18
Scotland	10	3	4	3	9	7	13
Slovenia	10	3	3	4	10	13	12
Belarus	10	2	4	4	12	14	10
Moldova	10	1	2	7	5	16	5

Group 6

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
England	10	8	1	1	17	5	25
Poland	10	8	0	2	27	9	24
Austria	10	4	3	3	15	12	15
Northern Ireland	10	2	3	5	10	18	9
Wales	10	2	2	6	10	15	8
Azerbaijan	10	0	3	7	1	21	3

Group 7

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Serbia and Montenegro	10	6	4	0	16	1	22
Spain	10	5	5	0	19	3	20
Bosnia-Herzegovina	10	4	4	2	12	9	16
Belgium	10	3	3	4	16	11	12
Lithuania	10	2	4	4	8	9	10
San Marino	10	0	0	10	2	40	0

Group 8

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Croatia	10	7	3	0	21	5	24
Sweden	10	8	0	2	30	4	24
Bulgaria	10	4	3	3	17	17	15
Hungary	10	4	2	4	13	14	14
Iceland	10	1	1	8	14	27	4
Malta	10	0	3	7	4	32	3

Asian Zone

- 4.5 teams qualify from two groups.
- The two top teams from each group qualify
- Bahrain beat Uzbekistan for the right to play the fourth placed North American qualifier (Trinidad and Tobago) for a place at the 2006 World Cup.

Playoff Bahrain v Trinidad and Tobago

Group A

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Saudi Arabia	6	4	2	0	10	1	14
Korea Republic	6	3	1	2	9	5	10
Uzbekistan	6	1	2	3	7	11	5
Kuwait	6	1	1	4	4	13	4

Group B

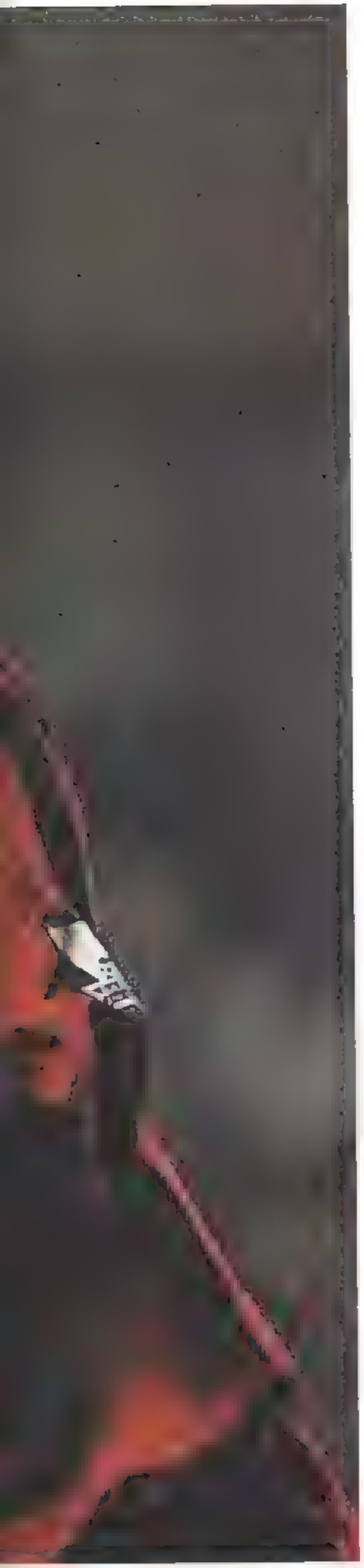
Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Japan	6	5	0	1	9	4	15
Iran	6	4	1	1	7	3	13
Bahrain	6	1	1	4	4	7	4
Korea DPR	6	1	0	5	5	11	3

Oceania Zone

- 0.5 teams qualify from one group
- Australia beat Solomon Islands for a spot against the fifth-placed South American team (Uruguay)

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Australia	5	4	1	0	21	3	13
Solomon Islands	5	3	1	1	9	6	10
New Zealand	5	3	0	2	17	5	9
Fiji	5	1	1	3	3	10	4
Tahiti	5	1	1	3	2	24	4
Vanuatu	5	1	0	4	5	9	3

Harry Kewell is Australia's most recognisable football export.



". eft Australia when I was 19. Every day I think about Australia. I'm going to go back home and rip up my passport so I won't be able to travel anywhere."

These are the heartfelt words of former Qantas Socceroos skipper Paul Okon. The midfielder, now in the twilight of his distinguished European career, said this three years ago and he's still playing overseas (in Cyprus, actually). And he's not alone in yearning for his beloved home country.

Australians have a great tradition of travelling. And like our intrepid backpackers, Aussie footballers have had their own journeys of enlightenment in the past 20 years. Pioneers from the '80s like Eddie Krncevic and Robbie Slater paved the way for what has since become a wave of local stars going overseas.

Right now more than 100 Aussie players are scattered around the world, mostly in Europe. With the world game as their passport, they still have that spirit of wanderlust – but homesickness, loneliness, struggles to fit in are themes that still come through.

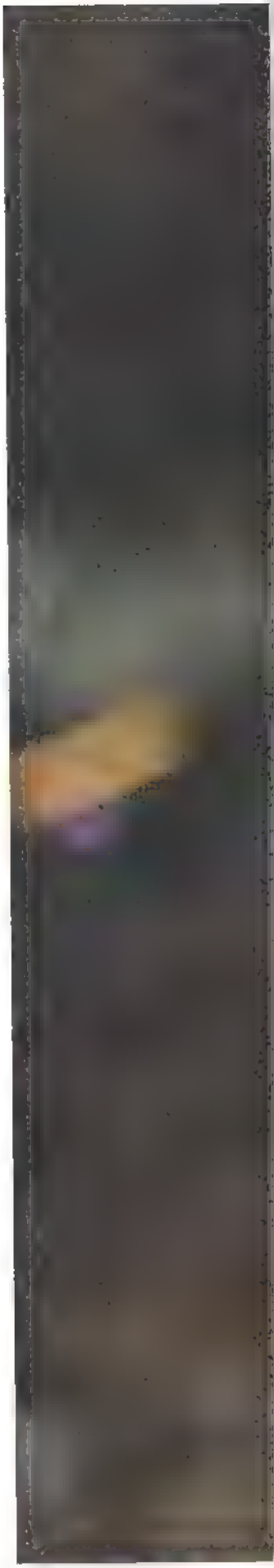
"I think all the challenges thrown at me in the Netherlands during the last six years have put me in good stead," says Qantas Socceroo Jason Culina, who recently signed to Dutch side PSV Eindhoven from FC Twente.

His story is a classic tale of dogged persistence triumphing over homesickness and rejection. Culina, now 25, signed for Holland's legendary Ajax aged just 18, but struggled to make an impact under coach Ronald Koeman. The midfielder admits he was on the brink of coming home two years ago.

His father Branko Culina, a former player, could see how his son's confidence was shot. "It was an enormously hard time for Jason," recalls Branko.

"When he first went over, he'd met a girl in Australia just before, so that made it difficult for him to focus. Then there was the cold climate and some Dutch people can be quite demanding. I'd talk to him on the phone about such struggles being part of the life journey ... he had to be prepared to overcome those hard times."

Jason's father would make regular visits to Holland. He's blunt in his assessment of the young Ajax hopeful, who went on to have spells with two other Dutch clubs before his move to Ajax rivals PSV.



EXPORT Quality

No matter how far and how wide they roam, Australia's overseas football stars still call Australia home.

By David Lewis

The many Aussie experiences throughout the world form a rich part of our game's history.

John Crawley describes his move to Chile as "daunting"

"I would don't have picked him if I was his coach in the early days," admits Branko. The Qantas Socceroo star is now considered one of the hottest properties in Dutch football. Last season he scored 12 goals in 38 games for FC Twente.

"It has not only made me a stronger person now," Jason says of his early hard times, "after my football career is over, I'll be a better person for it."

But it's not just Europe that Aussies have been drawn to. Keeper John Crawley, currently with Central Coast Mariners, toured Chile with the Australian schoolboys side in 1990. After that trip, he spent six seasons in relative anonymity in Chile, mostly with side Colo Colo.

"It was daunting at first, as no Aussie had made such a move," he recalls. "The living standards were lower than here and I couldn't speak the language." Crawley also suffered a bad bout of typhus during his time there.

He came home just twice in those six years. "I'd look at Sydney Harbour and it would remind me just how beautiful our city is," he says proudly.

Qantas Socceroo Hayden Foxe is another proud Australian footballer. But after leaving Australia in the '90s, he remembers the first year overseas as crucial. He says if you can get over that initial hurdle, "rosy days" will come.

Foxe also began his overseas career at Ajax, before playing in Japan's J-League and with England's West Ham and Portsmouth.

"It was a massive shock when I first went to Ajax," he says. "Without friends and family it's difficult, while on the pitch, every tackle has to be won. It's dog-eat-dog."

When he moved to Japan, he had the crucial support of Australian teammates Aurelio Vidmar and Tony Popovic to help him acclimatise to Japanese life. "Poppa's wife was a great cook. For once, I didn't have to cook for myself," he says.

Sydney FC's David Carney agrees that having friends and family close by is vital when overseas. With cousins already in Liverpool, his survival as a 16-year-old in what he calls the "cut-throat" world of football in chilly England was made easier.

But would living in a warm European country like Italy make life easier? Not according to Qantas Socceroo and Serie A luminary Marco Bresciano.

"It wasn't easy," he told *The Age* in 2003. "I was always thinking of my friends, my family, how far away from home I was ... I thought about coming home."

The many Aussies and their football experiences throughout the world form a rich part of our game's history. Now is the right time for the world to see us on the biggest football stage at the World Cup in Germany. Then, this nation of nomadic footballers might just feel at home. ✖

Jason Culina says his experiences in the Netherlands have made him stronger.

ALL ABROAD

More than 100 Australian football players ply their trade offshore. Here's a rundown on most of them.

BELGIUM

Stephen LAYBUTT	KAA Gent
Brendan SANTALAB	Belgium Sint Truiden

CROATIA

Eddy BOSNAR	Dinamo Zagreb

CYPRUS

Adam FOTI	Aris Limassol
Perry MOUSTAKAS	Apoel on Limassol FC
Paul OKON	APOEL Nicosia

DENMARK

Shane CANSDELL-SHERRIFF	AGF Aarhus
Alson FORMAN	Fortuna Hjorring
Jamie MCMASTER	AGF Aarhus

ENGLAND

Predrag BOJIC	Northampton Town
Jon BRADY	Hereford
Jacob BURNS	Barnsley
Tim CAHILL	Everton
Alex CISAK	Leicester City
Chris COYNE	Luton Town
Anthony DANZE	Crystal Palace
Clint DAVIES	Woking
Aaron DOWNES	Chesterfield
Gareth EDDS	Milton Keynes
Ahmad ELRICH	Fulham
Brett EMERTON	Blackburn Rovers
Adam FEDERICI	Reading
John FILAN	Wigan Athletic
Richard GARCIA	Cochester United
Adam GRIFFITHS	Watford
Rostyn GRIFFITHS	Blackburn Rovers
Scott GUYETT	Yeovil Town
Paul HENDERSON	Leicester City
Chris HERD	Aston Villa
Adam HUGHES	Doncaster Rovers
Shane HUKE	Peterborough
Scott JAMIESON	Bolton Wanderers
Brad JONES	Middesbrough
Harry KEWELL	Liverpool
Patrick KISNORBO	Leicester City
Stan LAZARIDIS	Birmingham City
Shane LOWRY	Aston Villa
Trent McCLENAHAN	West Ham United
Craig MOORE	Newcastle United
Gareth MUSSON	Wolverhampton Wanderers
Lucas NEILL	Blackburn Rovers
Les POGLIACOM	Oldham Athletic
Tony POPOVIC	Crystal Palace
Joel PORTER	Hartlepool United
Paul REID	Brighton and Hove Albion
Nick RIZZO	Milton Keynes
Mark ROBERTSON	Stockport County
David SCARSELLA	Barnsley
Mark SCHWARZER	Middesbrough
Andrew SHEPHERD	Cheltenham
Josip SKOKO	Wigan Athletic
Nick STAVROULAKIS	Peterborough
Frank TALIA	Wycombe Wanderers
Danny TIATTO	Leicester City
James TROISI	Newcastle United
Mark VIDUKA	Middesbrough
James WESOLOWSKI	Leicester City
Luke WILKSHIRE	Bristol City
Ruben ZADKOVICH	Notts County

GERMANY

Paul AGOSTINO	1860 Munich
Peter BUCAN	FC Saarbrucken
Charalaos GAITATZIS	Arminia Bielefeld
Frank JURCA	Hannover 96
Joshua KENNEDY	Dynamo Dresden
Christophe TENNERT	SpVgg Unterhaching
Morton VASS	Holstein Kiel

GREECE

Kyriakos TOHOUROGLOU	PAOK Salonika

ITALY

Marco BRESCIANO	Parma
Dez GIRALDI	Cuoco Pelli Cappiano
Vince GRELLA	Parma
Zeljko KALAC	AC Milan
Mario KARLOVIC	AS Cittadella
Carl VALERI	Grosseto
Jess VANSTRATTAN	Verona

MALAYSIA

David HARDING	Johor
Richard LUKS C	Johor
Gabriel MENDEZ	Kedah FA

MALTA

Michael XUEREB	Hibernians FC

NETHERLANDS

Nathan COE	PSV Eindhoven
Jason CULINA	PSV Eindhoven
Brett HOLMAN	Excelsior
Tony VIDMAR	NAC Breda
Lindsay WILSON	PSV Eindhoven
Peter ZOIS	Willem II

NORWAY

Dylan MACALLISTER	SK Brann
Sasa RADULOVIC	Lillestrom
Shane STEFANUTTO	Lillestrom
Kasey WEHRMAN	Lillestrom

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Chris O'CONNOR	Bray Wanderers

ROMANIA

Daniel CLITNOVICI	Universitatae Craiova
Ryan GRIFFITHS	FC National Bucurest
Jon MCKAIN	FC Politehnica Timisoara
Josh MITCHELL	Universitatae Craiova
Samuel Jordan SHORE	FC National Bucurest
Wayne SRHOJ	FC National Bucurestr
Michael THWAITE	FC National Bucurestr

SCOTLAND

Danny INVINCIBLE	Kilmarnock
Stuart LOVELL	Queen of the South
Adrian MADASCHI	Dundee
John MAISANO	Ayr United
Daniel MCBREEN	Falkirk
Scott MCDONALD	Motherwell
Steve MCDONALD	Motherwell
Craig SCOTT	Cowdenbeath
Scott TUNBRIDGE	Hamilton Academica

SINGAPORE

Jon ANGELUCCI	Woodlands Wellington
Christian CEVENINI	Geylang United
Alex DUNCAN	Singapore Armed Forces

SPAIN

John ALOISI	Alaves
Jose BELLO-AMIGO	Polideportivo

SWEDEN

Ante COVIC	Hammarby IF
Chay HEWSON	Vastra Frolunda

SWITZERLAND

Scott CHIPPERFIELD	FC Basel
Joel GRIFFITHS	Neuchatel Xamax
Ljubo MILICEVIC	FC Thun
Mile STERJOVSKI	FC Basel

TURKEY

Tansel BASER	MKE Kirikkalespor
Michael PETKOVIC	Sivasspor

Blackburn Rovers' Brett Emerton and Parma's Marco Bresciano still don the green and gold for the Qantas Socceroos

Generation NEXT

The next wave of Australian talent is chomping at the bit to prove itself on the world stage.

By David Lewis

Once destiny has delivered its verdict on Australia's World Cup campaign, the end of the road may be nigh for a batch of the Qantas Socceroos' over-30s club.

Failure to qualify for Germany 2006 could hasten the departures of Stan Lazaridis, Tony Vidmar, Tony Popovic and even Craig Moore into the international twilight zone.

In their place will step destiny's children. While cynics have long claimed the absence of such stalwarts will leave a talent void in the build-up to the 2010 World Cup, it already looks like their predictions are wrong and that Australia's future has arrived already – and is in safe hands.

Take a bow Michael Thwaite, the 22-year-old defender deemed unworthy of an Olympic Games spot last year who has been hailed as the find of the year after a dazzling debut in October's 5-0 thrashing of Jamaica.

A beneficiary of coach Guus Hiddink's policy of cherishing youth, pace, adaptability and verve, Thwaite is a lightning rod for the future shape of the Qantas Socceroos.

The days when the team virtually picked itself have given way to an age of experimentation under Dutch master Hiddink. Already, the mid-20s brigade of Jason Culina, Archie Thompson, Joel Griffiths and Luke Wilkshire has been thrust from the chorus line to the frontline as Australia lays down its platform for change. Beneath them, another tier of talent is emerging to restock the team for its foray into Asia and the 2010 World Cup campaign.

Enter Queensland Roar striker Alex Brosque (age 21), Newcastle Jets midfielder Stuart Musialik (20), Sydney FC defender Jacob Timpano (19), Melbourne Victory midfielder Kristian Sarkies (19), Victory defender Adrian Leijer (19) and Italian-based former Olyroo midfielder Carl Valeri (21).

Ange Postecoglou, coach of Australia's Under 17 and Under 20 teams, is the guardian of a batch of graduates he believes deserve a crack at the top – not in two or three years time, but right now.

With a heavy schedule of Asian Cup matches ahead next year, and then another World Cup campaign to plan for, Postecoglou says, "Go back in time and

PHOTO: NICOLE CLARY

Ange Postecoglou says Kristian Sarkies (right) is the best dead-ball specialist in Australia.

Young Olyroo Carl Valeri playing against Iraq in the 2004 Olympics

you'll find that most of the Australian players who have gone on to have great careers all made their debuts in their teens or early 20s.

"From Frank Farina to Ned Zelic, to Paul Okon, Mark Viduka and Harry Kewell, all those players broke through very early. I think it's time to start pushing the young brigade. In the Hyundai A-League you have the likes of Timpano keeping out Sydney FC captain Mark Rudan. He's a great competitor with a great temperament and I don't think he's too far away from the senior national team.

"We've already seen that Michael Thwarte is more than ready and has slotted in almost seamlessly. I also think Kristian Sarkies (another of Postecoglou's charges at June's World Youth Cup in the Netherlands) is an outstanding prospect.

"He's as good a dead-ball specialist as I've seen in Australia. He's comfortable on the ball with both left and right foot. I don't think people realise how good he is, possibly not even Kristian himself.

"He'll make a huge impact in the next couple of years. As will his teammate Adrian Leijer, who is excellent at the back and has taken to the Hyundai A-League like a duck to water."

Postecoglou is also an avid supporter of Alex Brosque, back in Australia after failing to break through overseas. But according to his former mentor with the Qantas Young Socceroos, he is on the cusp of career renaissance.

"A couple of years of senior football with the Queens and Roar will see him improve out of sight," he says of Brosque, also a member of Australia's 2004 Olyroos team. "I think he'll end up following a similar path to Tim Cahill, Archie Thompson and Jason Culina, who had barely been heard of at the top level two years ago.

"If you'd said they'd be where they are now people would have laughed. But all they needed was the right forum. Alex will be another one. He's an exciting player who can dribble and has a great left foot, I can foresee him dominating the Hyundai A-League within a couple of years.

"I also have huge raps for Stuart Musillak at the Newcastle Jets – he'll make it to the top, I have no doubt about that."

And for those seeking the next Kewell or Viduka, Postecoglou has answers in the form of under-17 players Kaz Patafta, the Joeys skipper and creative midfielder whose talents have attracted a gallery of overseas clubs, and Queensland-born striker David Williams, whose deeds also have European scouts gravitating like moths to a flame.

"These two will be the next superstars of our game," he predicts. "I hate to put too much pressure on them, but they have incredible potential. It's no surprise that big clubs are chasing both."

And hopefully they'll be soon proving those clubs right with match-turning performances for the Qantas Socceroos. ✖

David Lewis covers football for the Daily Telegraph *in Sydney*

Active Factor Top Shots

The 22 mascots accompanying players onto the field today have been given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to run onto the field with their football heroes thanks to *Active Factor* Top Shots.

Launched this year in football clubs throughout Australia, *Active Factor* Top Shots is a skill-based program designed to encourage children aged between five and 13 years to develop the basic football skills and drills necessary to move up the ranks.

The program, developed by Football Federation Australia and sponsored by Coca-Cola Australia, consists of three levels which are run by the team coach during weekly practice sessions.

Each level covers seven different football-related exercises such as juggling, dribbling and passing. Once children complete the first level, they then move onto the next level until all three levels have been completed.

The time it takes a child to complete each exercise and level depends entirely on the individual child and their skill level, making the program skills-based not age-based. Kids are also encouraged to practice the skills in their backyard with family and friends allowing them to progress at their own speed while having heaps of fun.

ACTIVE FACTOR

Active Factor is the activity arm of Coca-Cola Australia's Active Lifestyle Program, which consists of encouraging physical activity and educating consumers about diet and beverage consumption.

Active Factor supports programs that encourage children to adopt active and healthy lifestyles and that teach children the basic skills they need for an active life. *Active Factor* is the sponsor of the *Active Factor* Top Shots program.

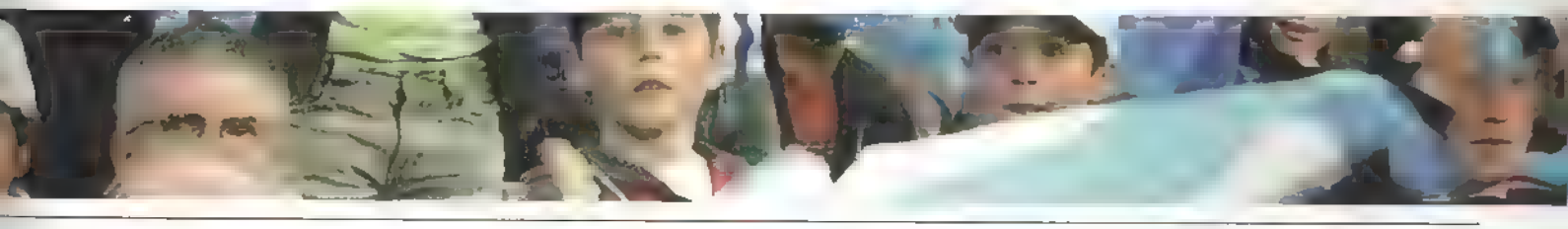
For more information on *Active Factor* and the *Active Factor* Top Shots program visit www.activefactor.com.au

Active Factor Top Shots ambassador and Qantas Matildas captain Cheryl Salisbury teaching a player to head the ball.

Talk about a revolution

After years of wrangling, change has finally come to football in Australia in the form of a new national league and a positive outlook.

By Jonathan Cook



Through the past 18 months, the game has undergone dramatic and rapid change. Old soccer has gone, and new football has assumed its place.

For decades, Australian football had threatened to reach its potential, but too often the winds of change eased before the country's sports fans even noticed. But now, perhaps more than ever, there is hope that the game's strides onto new ground will be permanent. With billionaire chairman Frank Lowy on board, and former rugby supremo John O'Neill steering the ship, football has begun a remarkable transformation.

Through the past 18 months, the game has undergone dramatic and rapid change. The new Hyundai A-League has been launched, Australia's place in the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has been confirmed, and legendary Dutch coach Guus Hiddink has taken on the job of Qantas Socceroos coach in the buildup to the World Cup qualifiers.

Old soccer has gone, and new football has assumed its place on the sporting landscape.

Big business has jumped aboard the football express, with names such as Nike, Hyundai, Qantas, Coca Cola and Telstra throwing their weight behind the code, and Fox Sports is committed to broadcasting the new Hyundai A-League around the country.

In April last year, the game was not quite as healthy, though medicine was being administered. Some 10,000 fans braved torrential rain as Nick Mrdja, now playing for Central Coast Mariners, scored the only goal of the game for Perth Glory in the National Soccer League's final instalment.

Mrdja's golden goal winner, which ended Parramatta Power's existence, brought an end to a competition that had unearthed some fine talent but struggled for popularity since its formation in 1977.

During the long hiatus between national competitions, there were some concerns among the football community that the new Hyundai A-League.

launched in August, would find it difficult to compete with established forms of entertainment. The cautious message from Football Federation Australia (FFA) was that the league would have a modest start. Yet the initial reaction to the Hyundai A-League (billed by FFA as "football, but not as you know it") has been incredible. In Perth, the opening fixture brought in more than 11,000 fans, while 13,000 showed up for Newcastle's first match. The first-round fixture in Queensland brought in a bumper 20,000 fans, but it was at Aussie Stadium in Sydney where the game's incredible potential hit home.

Some 25,000 supporters turned out to witness an enthralling 1-1 draw between Sydney FC and Melbourne Victory. Star turns Dwight Yorke, for Sydney, and Melbourne's Archie Thompson, who was on target in the Qantas Socceroos' recent 5-0 win over Jamaica, scored fabulous headers to top off the occasion.

Far left: Dwight Yorke celebrates his goal during the opening game of the Hyundai A-League season.

Left: Frank Lowy announcing Australia's entry into the Asian Football Confederation.

Below: Football Federation Australia CEO John O'Neill launching the Hyundai A-League.

Sustaining the crowds will not be easy, but early indications in most cities have been encouraging. Australia's acceptance into Asia has given the new clubs even more incentive – if it was needed – to succeed in the Hyundai A-League, with the promise of participation in the lucrative Asian Champions League on the horizon.

Asia will give the league's players an even greater stage on which to showcase their talents, while it will also open up new business opportunities in a market previously untapped by Australian football.

The move into the AFC will, perhaps, be most beneficial to the Qantas Socceroos, who will feast on a diet of regular and competitive matches, the likes of which they have been starved while bound to Oceania and its island-nation members.

AFC membership, which begins on January 1, 2006, has also removed some of the risks of Australia's World Cup pathway. However well the Qantas Socceroos had performed in Oceania qualifiers or warm-up matches, there was always the potential for failure in a two-match shoot-out against the fifth-placed South American team. Australia's next campaign will not involve such a tiresome and potentially troublesome scenario.

This time, though, in the last of its Oceania campaigns, Australia is better prepared than ever. National Technical Manager Ron Smith has scrutinised the South American nations during their 18-match qualification series.

In Hiddink, Australia also has a world-renowned coach whose exceptional work with South Korea at the 2002 World Cup earned him hero status in that country. The Koreans made it to the semi-finals against the odds, only to be knocked out by powerhouse Germany.

Hiddink, who also has commitments with PSV Eindhoven, was brought in at the 11th hour after previous coach Frank Farina's stint ended in the wake of a disappointing campaign at the June Confederations Cup in Germany.

Though Hiddink's appointment came out of the blue, it served to reinforce the FFA's insistence that no stone would be left unturned in this World Cup quest.

While preparation has put Australia in a good position to qualify, Hiddink says the Qantas Socceroos still need a little miracle to succeed against the powerful South American nation.

Whatever happens at Telstra Stadium in Sydney tonight, Australian football has already charted a winning course. ✖

Jonathan Cook is football writer at The West Australian *newspaper.*

Acknowledgements

Football Federation Australia recognises the continued support of its partners.

Australia trains before its match against the Solomon Islands.

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On our 85th birthday, Qantas wishes the Qantas Socceroos all the best as they journey towards the 2006 World Cup. Qantas and the Qantas Socceroos. Proud to be part of the same team. That's the spirit, **The Spirit of Australia.**
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